

R. García y Robertson, A Princess of Helium

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Rod Garcia's first story collection, The Moon Maid and Other Fantastic Adventures, came out in hardcover earlier this year to good reviews. The same can be said of his fourth novel, his fantastic Western, American Woman. Meanwhile, Rod's short stories are getting reprinted more widely in anthologies like David Hartwell's Year's Best SF...all of which underscores our delight in bringing you this new SF adventure. While the title of this one fondly recalls Edgar Rice Burroughs's books, the milieu is definitely hipper than the Mars of Dejah Thoris. Let's hope we see more of it in days to come.

A Princess of Helium

By R. Garcia y Robertson

Mating Flight

LLENOR FLEW WITH WINGS spread wide, sculling with her wrists to maintain airspeed. Ahead lay South Pass, a serpent-toothed notch in a chain of volcanic peaks poking through the white cloud plain. Mt. Lemnos smoked in the near distance. Programmed memory made details instantly familiar, though Llenor had never been so far sunward before.

She wore a green bolero jacket over a harlequin flight suit with gold-black lozenges and flaring cuffs. Scarlet hair streamed behind her, whipped by the wind like a captain's pennant. Seeing a pair of wild rocs circling the pass, she wondered what they were doing so near settlement airspace. Hunting the unwary hippogriff? Or innocently mating on the wing?

Two clicks from the mouth of the pass, she caught the great wave of air where the prevailing westerlies roll over Dayside Archipelago, soaring on the standing wave like a fiery-haired angel. Her wings were eight-meter

Falcoform Condors, power-assisted, with foot-pedals, fingertip trim tabs, autoflaps and a flaring tail. Black photostrips on the upper surfaces allowed for glide refueling of the energy cells. They had borne her mother and grandmother before her.

Llenor was not aloft for the sheer thrill of flight. Below her the *Prinzess Lisa-Marie* approached the cloud-wracked gap. Powered by turbofans and a cold fusion reactor, the titanic art deco airship had glassed-in galleries, chrome falcon figureheads, and a lifting body hull — looking like the old Chrysler building, inflated and flying on its side.

The Helm was sending fragmentary pictures of weather in the pass; Llenor had to complete them. This was the *Prinzess Lisa-Marie's* maiden flight through South Pass, with its infamous crosswinds and fabled wrecks. Her captain felt driven to see to each detail herself, trusting no one's flying but her own.

Weather radar spotted a convection cell above the neck of the pass. Closing her eyes, Llenor took a swift look. The Helm beamed her a picture, which her navmatrix projected onto a file image of the pass.

Nanoseconds tumbled as she studied the image. Hot updrafts off the windward face of the Archipelago, hitting the clammy air in the pass, created downdrafts and condensation. 3V imaging made her feel like she was flying smack into the storm cell. An unsettling illusion.

Llenor opened her eyes. "Got it, Gramma Lisa."

("Still going in?")

"Tell you when I get there." Climbing over the peaks meant dumping ballast, then venting helium on the far side. Hazarding the pass saved precious helium, but risked wracking up the *Prinzess Lisa-Marie* on a cliff face or a low saddle.

("Your funeral, grandling.") A favorite expression. Great Grandmother Lisa's funeral was long gone by. As a girl Llenor helped scatter Gramma Lisa's ashes from the upper deck of the old *Beaulieu* out over the Great Reach beyond Mount Aphrodite.

("Take care darling." That was Mom, half a world away.)

(Lilith and Lucifer called out characteristic encouragement, "Break a wing!")

Funeral or not, Llenor aimed to go in ahead of the ship, feeling out the gap, before trusting it with a quarter-kilometer dirigible. Telling her

extended family to "mute it" — Llenor leaned forward, spilling air, lifting her tail and folding her wings back into a stoop.

Ariel's pull was half that of Old Earth. Falls started leisurely in .5 g — but were just as fatal. Many klicks below lay the hot dark surface, a pressure oven smothered in greenhouse gases. Pitiless terraforming had created a high altitude biosphere based on mountain tops and tall plateaus. But Ariel's lower levels remained lethal. If the crash did not kill you, the surface would.

South Pass rose to greet her. Airspeed climbed. Buffeted by turbulent air pouring into the pass, Llenor lowered her tail, turning her stoop into a fast glide, shooting into whirling cloudtops. She let cybersenses take over. Hearing with sonar. Seeing with radar. Ship's altitude and true height were beamed straight to the tiny navmatrix grafted onto her skull. Altitude slowly increased, while true height plummeted. Ground rose up under the airship, climbing toward the summit of the pass. *Prinzess Lisa-Marie*'s margin of safety sank steadily — 1300 meters. 1200 meters. 1100 meters...

(Helm called out, "One klick.")

"900 meters. 700 meters. 500 meters..."

("Only half a klick below the keel.")

"Drop ballast," Llenor commanded. She needed 500 meters of true height in hand to cross the summit.

("How much?")

"Keep us above a half klick." Gramma Lisa needed no instruction, having flown airships ages before Llenor got her wings. (When she learned she was dying, Great Grandmother Lisa had herself brainscanned. Llenor had downloaded her files into the *Lisa-Marie*, where she functioned as First Officer, always on watch, always at the Helm.) Water gushed from the forward tanks. Altitude shot up. True height held steady.

("Okay grandling, half a klick. Mind your flying.")

"Mind your own," she shot back. "Dog leg ahead." Past the summit, the pass opened sharply to starboard, skirting smoking Mount Lemnos. The *Prinzess Lisa-Marie* would have to start her turn while still in the gut of the pass. A fully loaded airship took her sweet time turning, like a beamy dowager at a dance.

Llenor banked high, raising her angle of attack to keep from caroming

off the canyon wall. Air spilled from her wings. Turning the stall into a sharp dive, she regained control, sliding into a shallow glide. The summit swept beneath her. Ground fell away. She called out, "I'm through."

Almost. Mt. Lemnos reared out of white blankness. Range closed rapidly. Llenor banked again, pedaling briskly to power her wings. She heard Gramma Lisa order the Helm put hard-a-starboard.

But the *Prinzess Lisa-Marie* swung perversely to port, caught in a crosswind. Alarms oscillated wildly. ("Damnation!")

Llenor tensed, forgetting for a moment to fly. Little sister Evie and a brace of cousins were aboard ship. And Llenor had put them all in harm's way — just to save helium. Her first solo command threatened to be a family catastrophe, as bad as the crash of the *Beaulieu*. She shouted into the thin wind, "Turn, Gramma, turn."

("I've got the Helm hard over, dear.") Turbofans whining in reverse, the quarter-kilometer ship, her helpless crew and extremely valuable cargo slid downwind, aiming to slam sideways onto the slopes of Mt. Lemnos. She would not be the first ship to fetch up against the volcano. In Gramma Lisa's day, Lemnos wreckers made rich livings off South Pass.

With only meters to spare, the rudders dug in. The ship swung to starboard, fins all but brushing a tremendous cinder cone to port.

("We're through.") Dead hands at the Helm had not lost their cunning. A chorus of amens came over the comlink — mixed with pant hoots from the SuperChimps — half the crew had been holding their breath.

Shaking with relief, Llenor righted her own leeward drift, shooting out of the clouds — with the airship's great lifting body hull gleaming behind her. *Prinzess Lisa-Marie* had cleared South Pass, and was ready to enter harbor.

Congratulations rang in Llenor's head:

("Great job, grandling.")

("Yeah, Llenor," yelled Evie.)

("Lucky break," chorused Lilith and Lucifer.)

("Good going, daughter. See you in Graceland.") That last was Mother at home in the Twilight Belt.

A cloud-filled mountain cauldron opened up ahead, with Port Myrine and the Lemnki settlement clinging to the far slopes. Stacks of hangars and a tall line of downwind mooring towers marked Myrine harbor.

Skimming the cliffs, Llenor let the *Prinzess* pass beneath her, doing a flat dive at the upper deck. Spilling air, she stalled out, dropping her feet from the tail boom to touch down.

Her bosun stood ready to catch her. He was a Thal, with the impossible name of Wah-tsoph-ki, hugely thick and broad-shouldered, wearing only his rigger's harness and safety line. Llenor's landing made his assistance a mere civility — their hands barely touching. But all Thals were wedded to simple ritual. Show Neanderthals token respect, and Homosapiens got away with murder. Otherwise there was no ceremony marking Llenor's return. No bells rung. No "captain coming aboard." *Lisa-Marie* was a family ship, run like a business, not like a battle cruiser.

Llenor surveyed the long sweep of duraluminum deck, broken by streamlined hatch cowlings. She had brought in the ship. Her ship. But only by a pinfeather. She had been scared senseless when the airship swung to port. But the *Prinzess* was a lucky ship. Maybe that luck was working for her.

Two hideous eight-limbed Bug Warriors guarded the cowling leading to the main cargo hold, clutching heavy assault rifles in their clawed forelimbs. Soft Prospero light glittered off armored carapaces. Llenor hated carrying Bug Warriors, but this trip the *Prinzess Lisa-Marie* crawled with them.

Llenor spotted the Port Master's gig coming out to greet them.

("Careful, grandling, we're coming about.")

Snapping her safety line to a recessed stanchion, Llenor grimaced as the airship pivoted beneath her, turning to port to avoid settlement airspace. She hated unnecessary maneuvers in lively weather. Before the Settlers came, the idea of "owning" airspace was ludicrous. Air was air. You breathed it. If you had wings you flew in it. There were common sense rules, like giving way to starboard, or not emptying sanitary tanks in port. When Settlers announced that the air above the settlements "belonged" to them, pilots laughed. Then the Settlers set up flak towers and shot down intruders, putting an end to laughter. Now everyone humored them.

The Port Master's gig turned with them, cutting through forbidden airspace to catch up, showing that someone aboard had settlement permission. The small semi-rigid flew a captain's pennant above the Port Master's flag. Llenor nodded to her bosun. "Get ready to receive the gig."

Wah-tsoph-ki sounded his pipes and SuperChimps tumbled out of hatch cowlings to port and starboard. The gig matched vectors, dropping her mooring grapples. Chimps seized the dangling lines and marched the gig forward, fixing her nose to the foremast, then snapping the lines onto stanchions. The gig was moored. The *Prinzess* might lack the pomp and polish of a naval vessel, but she had a crack crew. Docking two moving ships with several clicks of air beneath their keels is not easy. Wah-tsoph-ki made it seem routine.

A smartladder wheeled itself up to the gig's main hatch, and a handsome Homosapien stepped out — tall and muscular, with high cheekbones, deep luminous eyes, and black windblown hair. He wore a jaunty electric blue skin-suit, with BELL'S BANSHEES stenciled above the left breast. An amused grin made it seem that he sensed the absurdity of meeting so casually in midair. Llenor liked that.

Two women stepped out behind him, one dark, one blonde — but he was clearly in charge. And likely to do the talking.

Bug Warriors appeared behind the women, slimmer and more scantily armored than the ones on the *Prinzess Lisa-Marie*. The Bugs aboard ship by the cargo hatch bristled, venom spines rising on their backs. Llenor heard the warning snicker of assault rifle safeties sliding off.

Instantly the man spun about, snapping an order. His xenos disappeared into the gig. The hatch guards lowered their venom spines. Safeties slid back on. Everyone breathed again.

Turning to Llenor, he bowed slightly, apologizing in polite Universal, "Sorry to upset your xenos. Captain Bell, of Bell's Banshees, enthusiastically at your service."

He did not bother to ask if she was Ship's Mistress, just assuming it — easy, effective flattery. Bell was smart as well as pretty. Not dithering about, asking permission or standing on his "rights." He saw, and acted. An immediate, intelligent response, rendered in take-charge fashion.

Llenor didn't imagine she came off half so smashing, with wings limp, and her long red hair plastered with cloud dew. She had a flier's body — light, sturdy, strong at the shoulders — but nothing to turn a head, except perhaps her hair. She shot a mental question to onboard memory, "Who is he?"

(BELL, Captain Lysander Adam; Knight-Commander in the Noble

order of Condottieri, born offplanet, in interstellar transit aboard the colony ship *Sierra Leone*; served with the White Company in the Far Eridani; in action on Delta Eridani II and Piscium III, awarded Imperial Star, second magnitude. Came to the Kaitos with a single starship, the AMS *Spartan*; raised his own company insystem — “Bell’s Banshees” — serving on Mount Zion and the Dayside Archipelago; presently employed by the Helium Works; *no known wives or offspring*. Gramma Lisa highlighted that last part. “But bound to be fine breeding stock,” she added.)

Llenor could *see* that. Breezy confidence and negligent good looks made Bell the most mateable male she had ever met. A man to make you give up all thought of cloning.

Bell touched her wings. “You flew the canyon in these?”

Clouds still boiled out of South Pass — Bell seemed amazed anyone could navigate them with an airship in tow.

Llenor admitted she had, no longer so ashamed of her hand-me-down wings.

“You must show me how sometime.” He nodded toward the Bugs by the cargo hatch. “Helium Works wants the Banshees to back up the cargo transfer. Just in case...” He did not need to list the hazards of her cargo. His visit amounted to an unannounced face-to-face by hired security for the Helium Works — but Llenor welcomed the snap inspection, having nothing to hide, and finding the hired gun handsome. She was not even smuggling this trip. Not with what she had aboard.

Bell nonchalantly introduced the women. “Commander Kia, my Exec, and an aide, Ensign Amanda.” Kia’s short dark hair framed a keen tight-lipped face, with no trace of Bell’s hidden amusement — just the business-like smirk of an experienced merc. One who had “seen too much, and killed too often.” Ensign Amanda was a sunny contrast. Small and blonde, with a look of utter blue-eyed innocence — despite a big recoilless automatic hanging on her slim waist. Saint Priscilla of the machine pistol. An odd pair, even for female mercs.

Llenor shed her wings — handing them off to a Chimp — offering Bell a quick look at onboard security. “If you like.”

Bell happily fell in with the suggestion.

Slipping her safety line, she led her guests to the upper main cargo lift.

Bug Warriors — who bristled at seeing their own species — let armed humans troop by without a second look. Lights went on for Llenor, winking out behind her. Doors dilated. She loved the way the ship obeyed, tracking her movements, anticipating her needs.

She told the cargo lift to take them down to the keel. The main hold swarmed with Bug Warriors, jammed muzzle to mandible to make room for a mobile pressure vault with a blast-proof lock. The usual eight-legged horrors were backed by a brace of double-ended sixteen-leggers mounting mini-cannon, aimed smack at the lift. If they ever fired, the barrage would rip right through the hull, exploding well beyond the ship. But there was no arguing with Bug Warriors. They had to be humored or killed.

Bell whistled appreciatively. "Seems damn secure."

To Llenor it was a bomb about to blow, but she did not say so. Her family had been seduced by sky high cargo rates and bedrock helium prices. Llenor had tried to veto the cargo, but was out-voted. Making it all the more vital to succeed — she would not fail just for the sour satisfaction of being right.

Looking askance at the hold from hell, she told Bell she had to be on the forebridge for docking. Her disembodied First Officer could easily moor the ship, but Llenor did not mean to miss first-time landfall in a strange port. "Stay here and keep things covered if you want."

Bell looked politely aghast. "A few guns won't make an angstrom's difference. We're plainly at their mercy."

Llenor shrugged, telling the lock to cycle, letting the lift take them up. "Bugs got no big reason to kill us."

Bell cocked an eyebrow. "They wiped out a colony ship in Sculptoris sector."

Llenor corrected him. "They killed all the adult males, and women over breeding age." Survivors on the *Cape Colony* had been mostly young women, like Llenor. "They just wanted to improve our population mix. Bugs don't understand why we need old folks and two sexes."

The Sculptorian Symbiots, aka "Bugs," had spread themselves throughout the nearer spiral arm using a unique variation on hive reproduction. They aimed crude low-g ships full of egg cysts at clutches of G-type stars. Once they made contact with a space-faring culture the symbiots became indispensable, each hive producing an endless supply of bio-engineered

servants, eager to perform the most obnoxious tasks — from fighting wars to scrubbing toxic tanks — all for the cost of feeding them.

"Beware of geeks bearing gifts," Bell warned. "Out beyond Sculptoris they've found whole planets full of Bugs, older hives that contain non-Bug types — previously unrecorded sentient xenos — living off what the hives give them. Which could be a lot, or hideously little."

Llenor laughed, "That's the Bugs, all right." Such previously unknown xenos had to be remnants of alien races. Xenos who had taken in the Symbiots — and now survived as genetic samples, preserved on the chance the Bugs might find them useful.

Llenor did not *really* believe the Bugs would take over Ariel. The eager adaptability that spread them around the spiral arm acted as a fatal flaw. Bugs did not invent or discover. They just plodded along, building their jury-rigged starships, serving anyone who stumbled on them. Straight out conquest seemed as alien to the Bugs as hosting a polka contest. Any natural animosity was reserved for their own kind. Some grotesque mechanism designed to spread the species made them maniacally belligerent in the presence of other hives. Spooky but comforting.

Of course the sad remnants of forgotten races, living on hive hand-outs, must have thought *they* were pretty clever and in control when they first found the Bugs and put them to work.

"You use them in the Helium Works," Llenor reminded Bell. Her family had struck a profitable deal with the Bugs — but that did not make them so different.

"That we do," Bell admitted with a grin. "That we do." Free limitless labor was tough to turn down.

The lift carried them in silence to the midline slidewalk. Llenor and Bell had the utterly thankless task of bringing two Bug hives together. The armored box below contained a Hive Queen — the egg-cyst laying matriarch. They had to take this Hive Queen to the Helium Works to exchange genetic material with the local Queen. A weird, asexual female-to-female mating between hypertense xenos — with Llenor and Bell as matchmakers — somehow vital to Bug survival. Both hives paid lavishly for the stud service, but if things went amiss it was pointless blaming it on the Bugs.

The forebridge was in its customary chaos. Sister Evie hung half out

an open widow, watching Port Myrine swing closer. Stepping off the slidewalk, Llenor snapped a safety line onto her little sister's harness. "If you are going outside, wear a line."

Evie laughed. A smaller edition of Llenor, eight years younger, Evie was otherwise identical, right down to the bright gold-black lozenges on her flight suit. Too young to stand watches, she acted as an unpaid cabin girl, supposedly learning from Llenor.

The Twins, Lilith and Lucifer, sat at their station, heads together — snickering. Llenor shot them a look. They switched to Old Speak, which the visitors were unlikely to understand. Crack comm-techs, the Twins often took it as their religious duty to offend strangers. Llenor's second cousins, they were nearly identical, with curly blonde hair and sharp demonic faces. As much alike as male and female can be.

Pleased to have an audience, Gramma Lisa landed with a flourish, sliding the *Lisa-Marie* in between two smaller semi-rigids. Human ground handlers, in white coveralls with swirling red stripes, secured the mooring grapples — something Chimps or Bug Workers would have done back home.

Glad to be safely grounded, Llenor saw her guests back to the gig. Bell complimented the ship. Even Kia, his grim exec, cracked a wary smile. Ensign Amanda said nothing, just continuing to look sweet — a lovely, gun-toting work of art that most likely belonged to Bell. Llenor hadn't the heart to be jealous. Ensign Amanda was one of those lucky few who radiated beauty and grace, making her mere presence a pleasure.

A middling strange threesome. But Bell was the one that mattered. His tough, ready good humor had her feeling better about pimping for a belligerent bunch of overarmed xenos.

Donning a visored green cap to go with her bolero jacket and harlequin flight suit, Llenor told Gramma Lisa, "Clear the off-watch for port leave — I'm going to Graceland."

[Gramma Lisa chuckled. "Say 'Hi' to Elvis for me."] Death had left her with a frivolous slant on religion.

Telling Evie to stay aboard — and out of trouble — Llenor separated a pair of electronic scarabs, clipping one to her sister's flight suit, tucking the other into a cuff.

Evie protested, "Please take me."

Llenor refused. "Too dangerous."

"I'll be lonesome. "

"I'll play you a game while I'm gone," Llenor offered. "You can be white." Slipping a loaded stinger into an inside pocket, she left the ship by way of the folding ladder on the aft hangar deck — the closest hatch to the harbor slidewalk.

(Evie opened flier to flagship four. Llenor replied, "Flier to princess-griffin four," plotting a Sicilian Defense.) The steady exchange of moves would be better than a stick-tight for keeping track of Evie.

Port Myrine's human ground crew lounged in the shade of the ship, looking almighty bored in their red and white candy-striped coveralls. Men among them applauded as Llenor stepped off the ladder. She flashed an appreciative smile, and got a swift shock. Between the ground handlers and the slidewalk stood a guard in green and black, sporting a riot pistol and a bandoleer of gas grenades.

No wonder the men seemed bored and overfriendly. They were convicts, penal labor. Port Myrine could afford to be lavish with human labor — like Bugs, they worked for meals. A woman sat among them, gaunt and gray-haired, dressed in candy-striped coveralls and electronic shackles. Their eyes met. Llenor sensed a surge of envy — as if the prisoner resented the easy freedom with which Llenor boarded the slidewalk. The woman looked away, staring listlessly into space. A nine-digit ID number was tattooed on her left cheek.

Love Me Tender

HUMANS, HALF-HUMANS, SuperChimps, xenos, and whatnot jammed the single-speed slidewalk. Finding her way blocked, Llenor stood watching port market stalls file past. Small Thal children sat leashed like dogs alongside heaps of nanoelectronics brought down the Archipelago from the Twilight Belt beanstalks. Hawkers in red flapping robes ran along with the slidewalk, waving bright offworld toys — pocket holocams, microprojectors, and the like.

("Flier to princess four," Evie threatened. Llenor replied with an exchange.)

Port Myrine was hotter than home. Shadows were shorter. Colors brighter. Ariel's axial rotation exactly matched her orbital revolution. At this longitude there was no night or noon. Prospero looped about a point midway between zenith and horizon, making it always mid-afternoon, or maybe mid-morning. At home in the Twilight Belt, Llenor knew a slow mode version of day and night, produced by orbital libration. Humans had lived offplanet for so long that she never connected daylight and darkness with the 24-hour clock brought from Old Earth. Landfall had been seven seconds shy of three A.M. — but all that meant to her was 02:59:53, three-quarters through the Midwatch.

("Roc to princess-griffin three.") Evie was bringing out her rocs.

Closing her eyes, Llenor summoned up the game. Never having so much as seen a board — Llenor pictured Evie's array as a line of winged fliers, backed by armored hippogriffs and gunships. Llenor's own pieces formed two lines abreast, like a flotilla of Black Pirates from Barsoom. Advancing one of her fliers, Llenor prepared to send her princess out aboard a sleek black destroyer.

The slidewalk did an abrupt turn toward Lemnki Settlement. Llenor got off. What she wanted lay upslope, at the end of a simple footpath. As she mounted the path, the sounds of the slidewalk faded. Birds stilled. A sacred hush settled over everything. Myrine could be seen but not heard.

At the center of this cone of silence stood the local Graceland Shrine, a relic brought intact from Tau Ceti by one of the first slowboats — before the beanstalks and high-g colony ships. Rusted columns supported a weathered dome and ivy-covered dish antenna. The sole attendant was a burn-scarred old woman. Sightless eyes stared over her offering bowl.

Llenor dropped a tiny zero-g purge valve into the bowl. Wizen fingers felt the offering, then signed a benediction, waving her into the Shrine. Llenor thumbed the lock and entered.

The door dissolved behind her. So did the Shrine, along with Port Myrine and the rest of Ariel. Llenor stood on a dusty bank, beside a huge sparkling sheet of muddy water a couple of clicks across, bordered by levees and canebrake. A sternwheeled riverboat churned past, belching black smoke from tall crowned stacks, making for a chute between the mainland and a wooded island.

She opened the zips on her flight suit. It was the sort of simmering

shadowless noontime found only on Ariel's Subsolar Plateau. But Llenor was no longer on Ariel — which had no great wide rivers. No steamboats. And no yellow sun. She was on Earth. Old Earth. Just outside Memphis on the Mississippi.

A boy sat fishing on a log, staring at the steamboat. He wore adult's cast-off pants, cut short and rolled up, and a ragged straw hat stuck full of fishing lures. Loose suspenders crossed his sunburned back. No shirt. No shoes. No stress. As the steamboat passed into the chute, he looked up at Llenor with a gap-toothed Huck Finn grin. "So you licked South Pass."

Llenor smiled back. "Guess I did, Dad." In Graceland the dead can pick their age and condition. Her step-dad spent eternity as a nine-year-old, matching his yen for youth.

Dad's grin widened. "Come on. Folks want ta celebrate."

He slid his fishing pole onto a bare shoulder and led Llenor away from the river. They crossed an old broken-down pasture, stirring up grasshoppers and tiny yellow skippers. A woodpecker hammered in the woods ahead.

At the far edge of the field stood a water-stained shotgun shack. A woman who could have been Llenor's twin sat on the porch swing, tuning a banjo. She had the same face, the same long red hair — but instead of a harlequin flight suit, she wore a loose white blouse and Daisy Mae cutoffs. She sang out, "Hi child."

Llenor said hi to Grandma Marge. Then the three of them set off through the woods, Llenor flapping along in her unzipped flight suit, Dad with his fishing pole, Gramma Marge carrying her banjo.

("Princess to princess two." Evie offered up a "poisoned pawn." Llenor swept down on the bait, knowing only cool play would keep Evie from trapping her princess.)

Under the shade of the trees stood a plantation house with tall fluted columns of white pine. Bluegrass poked through gaps in the brick walk. Family members poured out to greet Llenor. Mother was with them. She was the spit image of Llenor, Evie, and Grandma Marge — only a deal older and heavier. Not being dead, Mom would have considered it vain to appear in Graceland younger than she was.

Not all of Llenor's family looked like her. Some were barely human. She had half-Thal cousins. And there were SuperChimps in the family too,

adopted from the crew of the old *Beaulieu*. Not everyone could make it to the reunion. Some did not care to. Gramma Lisa was happy at the Helm of the *Lisa-Marie*, swearing she would not be caught dead in Graceland.

Those who came treated Llenor to an old-fashioned picnic of fried chicken, sweet melon, cornpone and crawfish pie. People passed mason jars and wine jugs. Guitars and rhythm sticks came out, and folks began to sing, leading off with "Will the Circle Be Unbroken," followed by a medley of Elvis tunes.

When they got to "Love Me Tender," Llenor cried at the outpouring of affection. Sometimes too much was expected of her. Educating and entertaining Evie, taking custody of the Twins, captaining an airship full of gun-toting xenos. But with such love behind her, how could she go wrong?

Llenor left the Shrine happy and hungry — virtual feasts never filled you up. It was eerie to step from Old Earth back into the endless afternoon of Port Myrine. No time seemed to have passed. Soft Prospero light fell at the same angle, casting the same shadows. As she left the cone of silence a skycycle swept by overhead, pedaling toward a floating villa, scattering a flock of silverwings feeding on windblown spores.

"It's all done with sensurround."

Startled, she looked downslope. It was Bell, resting on his heels beside the dusty footpath, looking a bit ashamed of his joke. Everyone knew shrines did not bring back the dead — but an unbeliever never knew the peace they gave the living.

Bell stood up. "Bet you're starving." Showing he knew more about the shrines than most unbelievers. After flying South Pass, followed by a virtual picnic, Llenor could have wolfed down a meal fit for the King. Mashed potatoes and pizza, or fried peanut butter and banana sandwiches.

She dashed off a mental message. "Gramma Lisa, I'm eating ashore." It was her *business* to know Bell better.

("Aye, aye, Capt'n. Ship's quiet as the grave. Just watch yourself.")

("Enjoy child, but be careful.") That was Mom, listening in. This was going to be one of those outings where everyone watched her steps.

Evie came on, begging another game. ("You can be white.")

("Okay. Flier to princess-griffin four.")

("Roc to princess-griffin three.") Evie declined Llenor's opening

gambit. Llenor shifted to the Tartakower variation, something she could play in her sleep.

Bell escorted her to the slidewalk. Port Myrine eateries were smoke darkened chop-shops, or plain canopies shading a gas ring set on the ground. The better sort doubled as brothels.

"Noodles 'n Nudes — Food and Bodies from out of this World
Four Different Cuisines! Five Different Sexes!"

Bell shook his head. "Wouldn't touch that with a forty-meter mooring mast." Llenor believed him. His skin-tight uniform showed no hint of overindulgence. She wished she could reach out and feel him, to make sure he was not a holo. He seemed that perfect.

The slidewalk swung right up to Lemnki Gate. Flak towers poked over the settlement's energy fence. Bell started to step off. Taken aback, Llenor seized his arm. It felt rock solid, not at all like a holo. "They won't let me in."

"Nonsense." Bell's smile turned mischievous, like a boy relishing a chance to do wrong. "Here the condemned can get a decent meal." His thumb print cleared hers.

("Have courage, child," Mom advised.)

Behind the slate gray fence a shoulder of Mt. Lemnos had been blasted flat, creating a grassy expanse, as green as Graceland. Geodomes rose among the hedgerows. After the menagerie in Port Myrine, it was weird to see nothing but humans. Lots of them. And all so different. A dozen races. Each face unique.

Bell steered her toward a glass and chrome pavilion with soaring cantilevered wings anchored in ferroconcrete. Letters in tasteful Universal script floated before the entrance ramp:

THE INTERNATIONAL

FINE DINING FROM AROUND THE GALAXY

THE BEST DISHES OF OLD EARTH, TAU CETI, SIRIUS, AND THE ERIDANI

(HUMAN SERVICE ONLY. THE MANAGEMENT WILL NOT SEAT XENOS,
HOMONEANDERTHALS, OR BIOENGINEERED BEINGS OF ANY SORT.)

The redundancy of the last part was chilling. Since entering the settlement Llenor had not seen anyone looking the least bit "bioengineered." Much less a Thal or xeno.

Bell took her firmly by the elbow. "Only a restaurant. It won't eat you."

Striding straight through the message, he found them seats on a hanging veranda. A young man in a silver cape and skin-suit met them at the table. Expecting an introduction, Llenor assumed one of Bell's officers had joined them for lunch. All Bell said was, "We'll start with sliver-leaf salad, carrot and cashew soup, and a pitcher of apricot lassi."

Mr. Silversuit was a waiter, something Llenor had heard of, but never seen. Scary, but at least he did not have a number tattooed on his cheek.

Rattled at the thought of human service, Llenor found the menu overwhelming. The place offered everything from "Baked Lyrian Blue-fish" to "Hush Puppies and Hoe Cakes." Plus a whole list of "Sweet Inspirations." Bell suggested the *Champignons farcis* with black bean bulgar. Llenor swiftly agreed, hoping that would make the waiter go away.

(Evie castled. Llenor came back with hippogriffin to gunship four.)

Bell waved Mr. Silversuit off, saying, "They make the best *soufflé rothschild* this side of the Sad Cafe."

Llenor muttered, "Maybe we should go *there*." She would have felt safer at that noodle-cum-knocking-shop by the slidewalk.

"It's in Glory System in the Far Eridani." Bell cocked an eyebrow. "You're not nervous, are you?"

Llenor nodded, staring off at a herd of real hippogriffs grazing at the edge of the trees — semi-intelligent bird-winged beaked quadrupeds, bioconstructs from Beta Hydri IV, used as gardeners, beasts of burden, and pieces in aerial chess. They broke the monotony of seeing only humans.

("Flier to flag-gunship three," Evie threatened again.)

"Is it because you are a clone?" Bell asked.

Llenor gave a startled nod, looking to see if the waiter was hovering about. "How did you know?"

"Your little sister looks exactly like you. And those twins are a dead giveaway."

The waiter popped back up with their pitcher of apricot lassi.

("Flier to flag-griffin three," Evie repeated impatiently.)

Llenor started a furious series of exchanges to keep Evie occupied. Flier takes flier. Roc takes flier. Griffin takes griffin. Princess takes griffin...

The waiter poured the lassi and left. Under her breath, Llenor confessed that she and Evie were clones of her mother. All of them being genetic copies of Gramma Marge.

And Lilith and Lucifer were not just twins. "They are clones of Aunt Freya — only Lucifer was gene-spliced to produce testosterone at puberty. Until then everyone *thought* he was a girl. Then during one Wedding Day skinny-dip — Wham!"

"You discovered Lilith had a brother?"

"One May First we girls aren't like to forget."

Even coming from three generations of women who had reproduced without men, Llenor found the Twins eerie. "They do everything together. Standing the same watches. Sharing the same cabin. They're *never* out of each other's sight."

"What's that language they speak among themselves?"

"English mostly," Llenor admitted.

"I suppose you speak it too."

"Only at home." Llenor tried not to look ashamed. Elvis *sang* in English, but she did not say it — no sense spoiling things by arguing religion.

Bell rolled his eyes. "Don't use it around here."

Llenor knew better than that. It was bad enough *being* in a settlement. She kept fearing some overpolite waiter would pop up and denounce her as a "bioengineered being" pretending to be human. "Does that bother you?"

"That you speak a dead language?"

"No, that I'm a clone." She desperately hoped it didn't matter.

Bell laughed. "Hell no. It's who you are that matters, not how you got here. So far what I see is great."

Llenor blushed. Embarrassed but happy.

"And being your mother's twin is not technically a crime. You must be genetically altered to run afoul of Settler Law."

Like Lucifer. Llenor had a horrid image of the Twins run amok in Lemnki Settlement. It would get them all burned at the stake. She took a

swig of the lassi, finding it cool and tingly, feeling instantly better. Almost light-headed.

The waiter returned, and Bell deftly switched subjects, saying the Helium Works gig was just to keep the Banshees breathing. "I don't aim to start a xeno stud service."

"Then you'll be up for hire?"

"To the highest bidder."

Llenor racked her brain for some reason why the family might *need* a company of mercenaries. Like to found a trading station beyond Aphrodite. Anything to keep Bell around.

(Evie threatened Llenor's remaining hippogriff. Llenor replied by grabbing a flier, setting up a wicked roc cross.)

Bell kept up an encouraging stream of conversation. By the time they got to the *soufflé rothschild*, Llenor felt absurdly relaxed. Ready to take on all the Bugs in Myrine. So confident she suspected there was something in the lassi. But Bell was matching her glass for glass.

He downed the last of the lassi. "Want to teach me to fly? I know where we can rent wings."

"Why not?" Llenor thought. She seemed to be several meters above the ground already. Having survived lunch at Lemnki Settlement, anything was possible.

They took the slidewalk back to the harbor. The hangar-top rental stall stocked everything from hang gliders to nine-meter Albatrosses. Bell became immediately enamored with a sleek pair of Sparrow Speedsters. Llenor steered him away from the Speedsters — "You can't start on racing wings." Instead she selected Peregrine Hawks, the closest to her own Condors, but better for beginners.

She started Bell off on short glides at the end of a flying tether. The sweeping updraft off the windward side of the hangars made it hard to fall. He beat back and forth, easily copying Llenor's movements. Either Bell was an apt pupil, or she was a natural teacher — but everything they did together turned out perfect. Immensely pleased, Llenor asked if he wanted to fly to the sky hook.

"Sure." Bell was clearly having a ball.

"You'll have to lose the ground line."

"Isn't that the object?"

Right. Llenor nodded to port, "Do you see the roost and skyhook?"

"Bearing two-nine-zero and a bit down to you." He had spotted the skyhook, transposing the bearing in his head.

"Cast off when you are ready." Llenor saw the tether line fall away. Except for a stiffness in his glide, Bell might have been doing this for decades. She took station above and behind, soaring out over the globe-girdling cloud plain. A pair of peregrines flew with them.

Ahead hung the hook, a series of trapeze seats suspended from an aerodynamic spar, looking like the fishing jigs Dad wore in his straw hat. As they approached, Bell's inexperience showed. He came in too fast, missed his stall, then missed the hook. Llenor had to dive down, catch him from behind, then let her momentum carry them onto the hook.

They ended up sitting on the same seat, laughing at her catch. Neither moved to break contact. "Magnificent," Bell exclaimed. "No wonder you are an airship captain."

"You'd be astonished." There was a story behind her first command.

"Why? Did you steal that ship?"

"Some folks think so."

Bell grinned. He was the type to appreciate a little ably engineered larceny.

"Mom was my step-dad's fourth wife, a lot younger than the others. We were never popular — an unwed mother with cloned daughters and weird Outback relations. But Dad took me on as a cabin girl, saying I should learn the trade." Until now Dad had been the only man in her life — unless you counted Lucifer. Her hero, mentor, and protector. "He took me to the Eastern Isles, even Nightside. By the time I turned sixteen he had me piloting solarplanes and semi-rigids."

"I'd like to meet him."

"He went down with the *Beaulieu*." The only place Bell would see Dad was in Graceland — and Bell was not a Believer.

He gave a sober glance. "I'm glad you weren't with him."

"He insisted I stay. Everyone knew the trip was iffy. The whole crew was brainscanned beforehand — right down to the SuperChimps."

Bell said he had heard of the wreck.

"His wives and grown children swooped down — kicking me out. Barring Mom from the funeral."

"That must have hurt." Bell's arm came out of his wings, taking her sympathetically about the waist. She leaned into him, letting Bell steady her on the seat.

"Then they decoded his will, and found a dying codicil — added as the *Beaulieu* went down."

"Making a provision for your mother?"

"Nope," Llenor laughed. "By then he and Mom were split."

It was plain Dad had transferred affection to Mom's look-alike daughter. "His codicil left the whole shipping line to me. The *Prinzess Lisa-Marie*, plus six semi-rigids and a solarplane taxi service."

Bell's blue eyes sparkled, "I'll bet that's a will they worked hard to break."

"They called me a little whore, and dragged us to an offworld court — but could not break the codicil. His wives all had lands and income, and could not claim to be destitute. To satisfy the court, I deeded the line over to my mom's family until I'm twenty-one. But I made damn sure I was Head Pilot." In half a year the line would revert to her.

"Do you mind that my family runs to extremes?" Llenor worried Bell would find this all too much.

"Like those twins?" Bell shook his head. "Being always together and sharing the same cabin, do they? Well..."

"I hope not." Llenor hated to speculate on the Twins' sex lives.

"Elviz would not like that." Bell bore down on the "z" to emphasize the Universal pronunciation. "Kissing cousins are okay, but the King knew where to draw the line."

"I don't think the Twins care what Elvis thinks. They're Satanists." Lucifer had been oddly unaffected by his sex change, going from being a weird little girl to a weirder little boy. But Aunt Freya was Reformed Church of Beelzebub, and acted pleased with her genetic joke. Giving up human sacrifice had not taken away their sense of humor.

"Elviz loved all religions." Bell's tone made it clear the King loved Satanism least.

"Sorry my family is so strange." She felt like a freak.

"No stranger than mine," Bell looked rueful. "You saw Kia and Amanda. My exec and her blonde young ensign. Their off-watches must make Lilith and Lucifer seem normal."

"You mean they are lovers?"

"If you call it that," Bell smirked. "Beauty and the Beast." It was an arresting image. Kia with her armorplate aura, having complete command over sweet young Amanda — an on-duty aide and off-watch concubine.

Before Llenor could recover, Bell leaned over and kissed her. A surprisingly gentle kiss, patient yet commanding.

Mother started to come on the comlink, but Llenor blanked the call, putting her whole extended family on hold. When their lips parted, Llenor asked, "Then you don't have a lover?"

"No — but I hope I am about to." He said it with soft reassurance, like someone not afraid of the finer emotions.

Llenor whispered a short prayer to Elvis. The King never thought sex was sinning. Even in his mortal life — before his returns from death — millions of women desired him. Elvis did his best not to deny them, but most went away disappointed. For of all the women in the world, Elvis loved his mother most — Gladys Mother of God. Until he met Priscilla. She was only fourteen, but Elvis knew she was the one. Priscilla's father — a great pilot and the original Colonel Beaulieu — trusted Elvis, letting Priscilla live in Graceland. Elvis could have succumbed to temptation any time, but he waited until Priscilla was twenty-one, and they were married. Waiting was hard on Elvis. And harder on Priscilla. But anything special is worth waiting for.

That was how Llenor felt about Bell. He was the one for her. And in a matter of months she would be twenty-one, owning the shipping line outright. Then if she wanted to sail off with Bell at her side, who would stop her?

But Bell wanted her now, and Llenor could feel herself yielding. "We could climb to the roost," he suggested. There was not much you could do, sitting on a narrow trapeze seat with nothing beneath you but cloud plain.

(Evie came on, demanding Llenor make a move.)

"Sure," Llenor nodded toward the roost. Closing her eyes, she took a quick look at the game. She had her gunships in line, and her hippogriff backing her princess. Evie's flagship was cornered, guarded by her roc and princess. ("Game's over girl.")

("What? No way!")

("Gunship to griffin eight, check. Roc takes gunship. Gunship takes roc, check. Princess takes gunship. Princess takes princess, mate.")

("Stinker!")

("Find something to do. Sis is about to be busy.")

Sis was about to be mated. Leaving their wings behind, they climbed the light ladder to the roost. Llenor left her bug clipped to her wings — there were lessons Evie did not need to learn just yet. The roost was a ringed platform circling the spar, held aloft by a gasbag farther up, tethered to the cliffs. From the roost Llenor could see the whole circle of the world. Port Myrine, Lemnki Settlement, and the cloud-wracked Archipelago stretching back toward the Twilight Belt and Nightside. And in the opposite direction, Mount Aphrodite.

Beyond Aphrodite stretched the Great Reach, an empty sea of air. On the far side lay the untamed Subsolar Plateau — a huge tidal bulge thrust through the cloud layers. A land of eternal noon, nine-tenths burning waste, with human and non-human enclaves clinging to its flanks, cut off from the rest of Ariel by danger and distance. They could explore it together. All it took was courage and imagination. And the willingness to wait a few months — until Llenor came into her inheritance.

But Bell wanted her now, deftly undoing the zips on her harlequin flight suit. His hands slid inside, caressing her bare hip, fingers brushing the rosy hair between her thighs. Llenor shivered. She just did not have Elvis' self-denial. Who did? The world beyond Mount Love would have to wait.

By the time they got back to the *Prinzess Lisa-Marie*, a warm rain was falling. In the shelter of the airship, Bell kissed her goodbye. They both needed sleep — or at least rest.

He looked up at the tall block letters on the ship's hull. "You'll have to change that name."

Llenor mumbled an apology, eyes downcast. "Lisa-Marie is a family name with us."

Settlers had declared Universal the official language, banning all foreign or alien spellings. Llenor's family tried to compromise, putting "Prinzess" in Universal — the ship's registered name. "Lisa-Marie" was an unofficial addition stenciled semi-legally onto the hull.

"It's sacrilege," Bell reminded her. "As bad as spelling Elviz with an

's.' Liza-Marie is a saint, whose marriage to a despised black man brought the races of Old Earth together."

Llenor nodded, ashamed that her folks were such hicks. She had not meant to slight Lisa-Marie, or the historic racial harmony her marriage to Saint Michael produced. Happily, Bell did not know that her Satanist cousins denied even the divinity of Elvis — hoping he would send them to Hell.

Llenor rode a clanking conveyor down to the local Bugville. She felt incredibly overdressed in her heat suit, rebreather, crash helmet and half armor, her hands encased in laser-gloves. Bumping along behind her was the armored box containing the Hive Queen, with a dozen mean-looking Bug Warriors riding shotgun. Meter-long insects buzzed about.

All she could think about was seeing Bell again. Dizzy with anticipation, she kept her visor up, taking in the warm soupy air. A hypertense Hive Queen mating, with heavily armed xenos for chaperones, is not an ideal second date — but Bell's confidence was contagious. This deadly rigmarole was just a last hurdle, no worse than navigating South Pass.

The conveyor descended. Terraced gardens gave way to kilometer-tall cloud forests. Giant trees planted to break up the mountain flanks pulled in air and light, shedding tons of organic matter. Winged bioengineers flitted through the steamy canopy, inspecting and pollinating. Each tree was unable to reproduce on its own, part of a *transition ecology*, intended to give way to self-reproducing species.

Heat and pressure mounted. Llenor sealed her visor, relying on the rebreather. Her suit refrigerator hummed louder, laboring to keep things bearable. None of this bothered the Bugs. Bug Warriors were tough, and the Bug Workers who drilled for Helium were bred to work in this stifling stew.

The Helium Works sat below the treeline on a barren rock bench. Pressure domes loomed ghost-like in the murk. The usual guards had been replaced by a squad of Bell's Banshees in pressure armor. Bug Warriors would not have been able to let rival hive members enter. The squad commander ordered the lock to cycle in soft no-nonsense tones. Bell liked female subalterns — "They work hard. Guys listen to them. And they are not prone to testosterone attacks."

Bell was inside, flanked by Kia, standing guard over the armored box

containing the Helium Works Hive Queen. Llenor made eye contact through their polarized visors. Bell's mouth was covered by his rebreather mask, but already she knew his face well enough to see he was smiling.

Bug Warriors lined up on both sides of them, just like mental chess, with Bell opposing her instead of Evie. Only this time the warriors and weapons were real. Spines bristled, and safeties snickered off. Tension felt as thick as the air.

It was plain the Bugs themselves could not have pulled it off. Not in such cramped quarters. Not with so many weapons. Xenobiologists speculated that such matings used to be frantic physical contests, where milling warriors were killed and maimed — each hive trying to get genetic material without giving any up. Assault guns and mini-cannon made such mêlées unthinkable. Humans had to substitute for brute force.

"Ready?" Bell's voice sounded flat over the comlink.

Llenor acknowledged, charging her laser gloves, breathing softly. Bell cycled his lock. She did the same. Vault doors swung slowly open, synchronized to give neither side an advantage.

The Hive Queens emerged, great segmented monsters with sixteen legs to a side. Normally humans never saw a Queen. Hives had no good reasons to relax their guard. They looked like two of the double-bugs run together — but while the sixteen-leggers had heads at both ends, Hive Queens had a single head, and rears clearly adapted for cyst-laying.

They reared up, legs beating the thick air, like huge centipedes doing some drunk ballet. A ripple ran through the lines of Bug Warriors. Llenor's fingers twitched inside her laser gloves. She had orders to shoot any Bug showing hostile intent — it was hoped the xenos would accept suppressing fire so long as it came from humans.

As if on psychic command the Hive Queens extended pseudo-legs from the underside of their main segments. Weaving back and forth, the spindly legs closed the gap between the Queens, each one tipped with a shiny wet sack.

Llenor watched, weirdly fascinated. She should have been scanning the ranks of Bug Warriors, but she could not. How often do you get to see a Bug mating? The act underlying seemingly infinite adaptability. The two sacks contained germ plasm brought across light years, stored for centuries. After hearing that the Bugs kept their former hosts as house pets,

Llenor bet her shipping line that not all the plasm came from Bugs. Other xenos, even humans, probably contributed, voluntarily or otherwise. Bell told grisly stories about the fate of the males aboard the *Cape Colony*.

The glistening sacks touched. And chaos erupted.

First came a stabbing flash of light. Polarizers on Llenor's visor cut in, but not before things went black. Diving blindly, she hit the deck, dazed and panic-stricken.

Then came the blast. A tremendous surge of pressure lifted Llenor up, slamming her into something hard. Only the rebreather clamped to her chest and the suit plugs in her ears kept her from being crushed and deafened. Bouncing off whatever she hit, Llenor saw spots, and heard weapons firing. Shrapnel rattled down around her.

She lay gripping the deck in darkness. The mad wall of sound sank down to a confused clatter, rising and falling as explosive shells searched for targets. Polarizers had saved Llenor's sight, but the Bugs were blinded, making them a dozen times as dangerous. Normally a Bug could be relied on not to shoot at a human — unless another human ordered it to. But these Bugs were wildly returning fire, shooting at sounds.

Shutting off her polarizers, Llenor strained to see. Dancing lights gave way to muzzle flashes. Most of the Bug Warriors were down. Hive Queen parts lay scattered about.

A single Bug, minus half its limbs, spun about on the floor a few meters in front of her, firing its assault gun, drawing fire from all directions. Just the sort of thoughtless hostility Llenor was supposed to suppress.

Carefully as she could, Llenor extended her right laser glove, raising the thumb sight. Four or five thumbs floated in front of her. She brought her left hand around to steady the glove, cutting the number of floating thumbs to two.

Splitting the difference, she fired silently, her laser splashing over the downed Bug. The xeno stopped shooting.

Crossfire slackened. Llenor looked about. Kia lay crumpled against the blackened door of a blast-proof box, missing an arm and leg, her body armor riddled. Bell must have been right at the epicenter. His bloody helmet lay a few meters off. She could not tell if his head was inside.

Hearing a plop, she turned to see a grenade land to her left. It rolled

toward her, stopping just out of reach. So close she could read the CAREFUL FLAMMABLE/EXPLOSIVE warning label. The safety was off. The trigger pulled. Horrified, Llenor raised her left laser glove to shield her face.

The blast caught her in mid-motion.

Jailhouse Rock

THE ROOM she awoke in was so white and sterile Llenor immediately tagged it as a sick bay. Being strapped to an autodoc with tubes snaking out of her lent substance to the assumption. It had to be a critical care unit since the walls were shielded, cutting off contact with the outside. Everything else was mercifully vague. She had been in the Helium Works, the Hive Queens were making it. Then wham! — all hell broke loose. What followed was a ghastly blur. She was fairly sure she had killed a Bug...

And Bell was dead. No doubt there. He had been standing atop the blast. Waves of grief and nausea gripped her. A wild sense of loss made her want to tear the tubes and patches off her body, but she hadn't the strength to get out of the autodoc.

Instead she lay there utterly alone — a novel experience that soon got annoying. Four walls were not so amusing. She got no comfort from Mom. No salty advice from Gramma Lisa. Even Evie wanting to play would have been something. Solitude was great for wallowing in grief — but it cut her off from life.

Her first visitor was a big disappointment. Without warning, a wall dilated and an offensively perky young woman appeared. She had short sandy hair, an upturned nose and an aggravating grin. "Are you conscious?" she asked.

"Not really. But come in anyway."

The woman took a couple of seconds to figure that out, then stepped inside, asking, "How do you feel?"

"Rotten" was the first adjective that came to mind. Llenor could honestly say she had never felt worse. "When do I get out of this autodoc?"

She thought about it, then decided, "I sure could not say."

Llenor glared at her tormentor. "Aren't you a medic?"

After another delay, she exclaimed, "Goodness no."

"Then who the hell are you?" Llenor saw she was dealing with someone *really* slow. The young woman had the look of a Settler, wearing a pearl-gray suit trimmed with taffeta. An audio-optical bug clung to her lace lapel, trying hard to look like a broach.

She took her usual irritating time answering. "I am Miriam Holiday. Your lawyer."

"My lawyer?"

Another blank moment, then she nodded enthusiastically. "Court appointed."

Llenor stared at the smiling, sandy-haired moron. "I'm talking to a bugheaded holo. You aren't even onplanet, are you?" The pauses were speed-of-light lag. Counselor Holiday was on one of the beanstalk geosync stations.

"That's right. I am Pair-a-Dice representative for Li Sing & Wainwright. Main offices in Mount Zion."

"I don't want a lawyer. All I want is to call home." Or better still be discharged. Sickbay felt claustrophobic.

In a moment Miriam replied. "I'm afraid you very much need a lawyer. Hasn't anyone told you the charges?"

"This is all a huge shock," Llenor assured her.

Miriam reeled off offenses, sounding like a summary of the penal code. "Terrorism, murder, malicious mayhem, willful sabotage, misuse of explosives, wanton defacement..."

"What? For killing a Bug?"

Another annoying pause. "That comes under defacement of property. Xenos contracted to the Helium Works are legally listed as equipment, to avoid the animal cruelty statutes. You are accused of killing Adam Lysander Bell, and his exec..."

Llenor remembered Kia, sprawled against the burnt blast door with an arm and leg gone.

"Prosecutors have established a prima facie case based on the microdetonator and superconducting primer, plus traces of nitrates on your clothes and body..."

"Detonator? Primer?"

Another maddening delay. "The primer and microdetonator found in your suit cuff."

Absolutely impossible. But the brainless holo kept spouting absurdities. Llenor was accused of preposterous crimes. And under Settler Law from the sound of it. She realized she was "baby strapped" to the autodoc, unable to reach the clasps.

"What about the Xenophobes?"

"The who?" Miriam acted like she never heard the word.

"You know. Alien haters. This bombing has Xenophobe all over it." Whoever killed Bell had wiped out two hives as well — without their Queens, Bugs could not long survive.

"You must be more explicit."

Llenor was literally talking to someone from another world. "Xenophobes. People who won't serve Thals in restaurants. And keep Chimps out of the Settlements. At every election the Humanists harp on how Ariel is reserved for humans. How they're saving us from the xenos. A lot of folks *really believe that*." As far as Llenor cared, Ariel could be reserved for *caterpillars* just so they got along.

Miriam replied primly. "Having or expressing an opinion about aliens is not a crime."

"Unless you express it by blowing folks away. Step-cousin Wilbur put a .20mm third eye in a SuperChimp — an' got off with a fine. Claimed the Chimp acted frisky."

"Frisky?" Another word new to Miriam.

"Cousin Wilber's a man of few syllables. And the Chimp could not tell his side. SuperChimps work hard an' cheap — and their babies are cute — but some folks still hate 'em. Bugs give everyone the heebie jeebies."

"So?" Her lawyer refused to see any connections.

"A lot of folks would like to blow the Bugs up."

"We can't accuse 'a lot of folks.'"

So much for Settler Law. Llenor saw the real bombers were not likely to figure in the case. "Look, I need to talk to my family."

Miriam considered. "An open channel is impossible. All visitors must come in person..."

Dad and Gramma Lisa could not come "in person." Mom was a world

away in the Twilight Belt. "How about my sister aboard ship?" Evie could relay a message home.

Miriam looked embarrassed. "The *Prinzess* is no longer in harbor. The Port Master attempted to board and impound material evidence. Someone cut the magnetic grapple and dumped liquid ballast, flying off with the Port Master and drenching his bodyguards with waste water."

Hurrah for Gramma Lisa.

"The Port Master survived, but is pressing assault and kidnaping charges against your cousin Lucifer Freyason..."

Survived? Lucifer must be getting softhearted. Or just slothful.

"...and an unknown Thal."

That would be Wah-tsoph-ki.

Miriam eventually faded out. Llenor realized she was on Jailhouse Rock. Not the original one, which was a prison asteroid in the Mt. Zion system. Or maybe orbiting Old Earth. This was the Port Myrine brig, on a pinnacle above the harbor. Every prison was called Jailhouse Rock.

And it slowly sank in that they *never* meant to let her out. Once she was out of the autodo, and dressed in candy-cane coveralls, there were enforced exercise periods, virtual interrogations, and 3V "social hours." All within her cell.

The trial was also in her cell. So was the appeal. Both before Settler courts. The main difference was the time lag. The first court was on Pair-a-Dice, and the light speed lag just made the judges seem slow-witted. The appeals court was in Mt. Zion system — several light hours away — making the second round seem like an episodic 3V play acted out in her cell. Llenor was allowed to proclaim her innocence at the cost of having to hear all the impossible, damning physical evidence. The nitrates on her clothes and body, the primer and detonator in her cuff. Half the judges had to be Humanist appointments, happy to have a culprit not tied to their party.

In each case the verdict was the same, "Guilty on all counts." The first time Llenor felt shocked, as if she had not heard right. The second time she expected it.

Miriam shook her empty holographic head, wishing she could have done better. She could hardly have done worse.

"What does it mean?"

Miriam thought a moment. "Standard sentences?"

"Unless they have some special on."

"Destruction and defacing, that's a simple caning — five strokes for each count. I think I can keep the total under twenty." Good for Miriam. Up till now having a lawyer had been fairly useless.

"The malicious mayhem, assault, willful sabotage, and misuse of hazardous materials; that's two to three decades of hard labor. Which I could try to get reduced. But you might prefer the full sentence..."

Why? For the fresh air and exercise? "What about murder and terrorism?" The charges that really scared her.

Signals seemed to take forever, leaping back and forth at light speed. "Oh, that's hopeless. There you're looking at death."

And hardly finding it appealing. "Then who the fuck cares about the other charges?"

Miriam took her usual time answering. "You might. I can try to get the caning waived. Or reduced. And the penal servitude put first. You could live for twenty, thirty years..."

Then be executed. She thought of the aging woman in the ground crew with a tattoo on her cheek. What was she looking forward to when her time was up? Llenor now wore nine similar numbers, listing her crimes and identity.

The labor sentence was at least life, and she might see the family. "What about brainscan?"

"It would defeat the purpose of execution." Miriam left.

Even Graceland would be denied her. But for the moment she still had her memories. Rummaging through navmatrix files, Llenor replayed her first solos at home, seeing the peaks of Atoll coming closer in low Prospero light. The huge Twilight Belt caldera had a dozen peaks, and two habitable sections of ringwall, surrounding a great eroded volcanic cone. Aerostadts swung between the peaks. Forests climbed the ringwalls. Mount Aloha was marked by the gleaming thread of Aloha beanstalk, rising out of sight to connect Atoll to Eden Station. An aerodynamic capsule was descending the stalk, like a silver egg on a steel guitar string.

She swung her ship up to the family mooring mast. Dad congratulated her. Mom and Evie came out to greet the ship.

Miriam cut the memory short.

Llenor left home thinking, "This better be worth it."

It wasn't. Miriam confessed that she could not get the caning cut to under thirty strokes. "They are determined to set an example."

Llenor was no longer surprised. Her luck practically demanded it.

"And they have commuted your labor sentence."

"Can they do that?"

"Work gangs are full. They are cutting back on prisoners."

In her case clemency meant beating and execution. They were keeping her in this box until it was convenient to kill her. Shaking with anger, she told her lawyer, "Just go away."

Miriam did not move.

"Go away," Llenor shouted. "You're worse than the Bugs."

Miriam left. This time for good.

By now Llenor hated the Settlers, hated them with all her heart. Until this happened, Llenor had been above politics, seeing no point to it. Some Settler party always won. If not the Humanists, then the Greens. Since the biosphere took hold, incoming colonists from Epsilon E and the Home Systems had outnumbered humans born onplanet. Thals, Chimps, and xenos had it easy — they weren't allowed to vote. Under Settler Law you had to be human, with no kinky chromosomes.

She had not minded Settlers running things. They were pushy but effective — putting down pirates and wreckers. Big on free trade. Only thing that had galled her was how they looked down on everyone. Thals and Chimps were automatically animals. Xenos were vermin. And now they meant to put her down without a speck of regret. Someone killed Bell and Kia. So the Settlers would kill her, strapped to the same autodoc she came in on. "Lethal injection," to teach the lesser beings not to play with bombs. Llenor shuddered.

Her innocence was a side issue. Settler Law was beyond the truth. Only "rights" and "legality" mattered. They were actually proud of that. Said it was a sign of civilization.

She hoped Elvis reamed them good. You can't fool the King.

From then on she lived for her virtual trips home, lying in her box, seeing Atoll and her family, reliving moments she had meant to keep forever. Giving up on "reality." Food and sleep were for the living. Llenor was as good as dead.

The next time she was pulled out was like a waking dream. Suddenly she was back in her cell — but not able to move. Paralyzed. Unable to twitch a toe. She wondered if her navmatrix had gone haywire from overuse. Her cell door dilated. Llenor expected to see Miriam, returning with one more inanity. Instead she saw a mobile bug. A six-legged electronic scorpion, with tiny lens antennas, and a huge hypo in its tail.

The bug entered, scurrying up the side of her bed, scrambling atop her immobilized body, headed for her neck. Its hypo tail raised. Llenor screamed, but nothing came out.

All she could think of was "lethal injection." This was not how it was supposed to happen. What about the caning?

The hypo took aim at her carotid artery. "This is for your own good," whispered the scorpion.

It struck. Llenor felt instantly better. Paralysis vanished. The hypo had held an antidote to whatever was holding her down. Plus some powerful stimulant. The scorpion leaped off her, headed for the open door, saying, "Follow me."

Llenor was up and out the door, ahead of the bug, into the lighted corridor beyond. But which way to go?

The electronic bug scurried between her legs. Doors dilated before it. Llenor bounded after it. If this was a dream, she begged Elvis not to let her wake up. She passed a pair of guards, sitting frozen at their terminals — watching her escape. Victims of a paralysis field. Or some anesthetic gas.

Llenor saw daylight ahead. She burst out onto a bare, flat loading dock, with tall slick walls. Prison trustees in candy-striped coveralls lay strewn about the penned-in tarmac. The nearest had an anesthetic dart in her neck. A pair of adhesive boots stood waiting on the dock.

"I'm free," she shouted. Not strictly true — she was surrounded by high smooth prison walls — but she gushed thanks for getting this far.

Voices filled her head in reply: ("Thank Elvis, dear." That was Mom.) ("We sure did not do it," Gramma Lisa assured her.) ("Thank Satan," suggested Lucifer and Lilith.) "Put on the boots," said the scorpion.

Llenor pulled on the adhesive boots, hurriedly telling everyone what had happened. The scorpion called to her, "Follow me." It scurried up the far wall. Llenor dashed after the bug, planting a foot on the wall. Telling

the boots to grip, she ran right up the wall, expecting a laser beam in the back.

She gained the top alive. And saw nothing on the far side but empty air. The leeward edge of the Archipelago fell straight away in a series of sheer cliffs. Wind plucked at her, trying to hurl her into the rocky abyss. Far below lay the broiling surface. Only the boots kept her atop the wall.

Llenor looked wildly about. The tiny scorpion climbed up her coveralls, perched on her back, and whispered, "Jump."

("What's happening?")

Llenor told them.

("Don't trust it," Evie squealed.)

("Take care," Mother advised.)

("Jump, jump," chorused the Twins.)

No time to hold a vote. With a Hail Gladys on her lips, Llenor told the boots to release, launching herself into space.

All Shook Up

"*Hail Gladys, full of grace...*" Llenor hung for an instant. Then she fell. With familiar slowness at first, as though she were in a stoop. Only with no wings to catch her.

"The King is with thee;

Blessed art thou among women..."

Speed built up. The wall slid past. All she could see was cliff face, and the clouds below. Falling ever faster, she spread her arms and legs as wide as she could, trying to get maximum drag from her prison coveralls.

"And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Elvis."

Wind whipped at her, tearing tears from her eyes. Clouds rushed up at her. Whoever was behind this had better act now. Unless this was some unnecessarily elaborate plot to kill her. Blindly obeying some bug — just because it let her out of her cell — no longer seemed the obvious thing to do. But what choice did she have? Lethal injection or a long fall? Hardly fair.

Llenor hit the first cloud layer. Cliffs disappeared.

Engulfed in silent gray mist, she might have thought she was no longer falling, except for the nagging reminders from her navmatrix.

She shot out the bottom of the cloud bank, and there they were. A pair of rocs plunged toward her in a stoop, wings back, matching her speed. Rocs were bred from condors ages ago on Old Earth — but their broad twenty-meter wings, big braincases, and tall aquiline beaks gave them the look of eagles. Clutched in their claws was a life line, with a rigger's harness clipped to it. The giant birds swung the line her way.

Llenor caught it.

The rocs pulled out of their stoop, wings beating, taking the tension as evenly as they could. It still felt like Llenor's arms were jerked from their sockets. Shoulders aching, hands ripped raw from catching the cable, she struggled into the rigger's harness, letting her full body take the strain.

She was off. Free and away. Her navmatrix was getting no signals that sounded like pursuit. Did anyone even know she was gone? All she saw was a pair of wasphawks, and some winged shepherds herding geese.

The rocs turned downwind, leaving the tip of the Archipelago behind. Ahead a sea of clouds spread out for thousands of klicks — the Great Reach. Llenor felt an instinctive surge of panic, setting out on a voyage airships and solarplanes seldom attempted — relying on nothing but a pair of strange rocs. ("On my way, grandling," Gramma Lisa announced. "TWO-TWO-ZERO to you, about 200 klicks out.") She had taken the *Prinzess Lisa-Marie* downwind to escape Port Myrine, then worked her way back up the lee side of the Archipelago. But it would take a while to run down a pair of rocs with the wind at their backs.

("Llenor should turn the birds around," Lucifer suggested. "Bring 'em back our way.")

("No! Don't startle them," Evie shouted.)

Llenor ignored the conflicting advice. Someone had taken huge pains to get her off Jailhouse Rock. The bug. The boots. The birds. Everything appeared as needed. The rocs had to be headed somewhere. She bet they would arrive long before anyone caught up.

Straining her eyes, she looked for some sign of a ship out over the clouds, spotting a black dot directly downsun. Prospero's glare kept her from making a positive ID.

The rocs beat nearer. It was not an airship. The dot grew into a floating platform. Not a big aerostadt, but a little sky island — taut helium tanks supporting a bamboo pavilion braced by gaily colored lines. Tall cumulus

clouds in the background made it look like a tiny piece of heaven, somehow come adrift, floating out over the Great Reach.

The rocs set her down on the woven path leading to the pavilion. Llenor looked about. A baby hippogriff clung to a nearby roost, terrified by the two big carnivorous birds.

"Don't let them eat the griff," ordered a soft authoritative voice.

Llenor turned toward the pavilion, to find herself staring down the barrel of a recoilless pistol. Ensign Amanda's angelic face smiled at her from above the hand cannon. "Shoo off the rocs," she ordered. "I promised the people who lent me this place they would not eat the griff."

Llenor waved the rocs away. They flapped off, circling overhead, then setting down on the far side of the pavilion. Rocs readily obey, but tender young hippogriff is always a temptation.

The 20mm pistol stayed aimed straight at Llenor. "Did you kill her?" Amanda demanded.

"Kill who?" Llenor was honestly unsure of who she was supposed to have killed this time.

"Kia."

"No. But I saw her die." Sort of. Llenor had been busy being blinded and thrown by the blast.

Amanda nodded. "Wanted to hear you say it. If I thought you had, you'd be taking ten steps back." Wind whistled off the edge of the floating island, two meters behind Llenor — with the superheated surface far below.

"Can I put this up?" Amanda meant the pistol.

Llenor nodded enthusiastically.

"Great. I hate talking over a gun. Unless I absolutely have to." Holstering the pistol, she held out her hand. The electronic scorpion hopped off Llenor and onto her.

Tucking the bug away, she invited Llenor into the pavilion. A porcelain tea set sat on fresh tatami mats. Amanda poured green tea for both of them, saying, "Tell me what you *did* do."

Llenor told her, starting from when Amanda disappeared into the Port Master's gig — describing her tour of Port Myrine, and her visits to Graceland, and Lemnki Settlement. Amanda was amazingly easy to talk to, with her warm smile and stunning looks. It was like telling your

troubles to a 3V star. Even with a pistol to her head, and a sheer drop at her back, Llenor had not been overly frightened. Amanda was that beautiful.

When Llenor got to her date with Bell, Amanda laughed. "So that's where he disappeared to. That sly fucker."

She shook her head. "I can just see him panting with charm. Bet he treated you to apricot lassi."

"How do you know?"

"Tried it on me. It hides an aphrodisiac. Don't you just love having a CO who thinks with his pecker?"

Llenor tried to say it was not like that, describing the flying lessons, and the flight to the skyhook...

"Right. Why do you think we're called Banshees? We're an *airborne* unit. He had his wings before you were hatched."

Llenor stared at Amanda over her tea cup, stunned and hurt. Feeling the emptiness under the pavilion. She *loved* Bell. Still mourned for him. He could have had her honestly.

Amanda reached out, stroking her cheek. "Don't blame the bastard. You're a real peach." Her hand came to rest on Llenor's shoulder, giving a squeeze, and staying there.

Llenor felt confused but comforted. "Thanks for getting me off that rock."

"All part of the service. Breaking in and out of the local lock-up is a standard Banshee exercise. Bell firmly believed that he — or someone important to him — was bound to wind up behind bars. It just happened to be you."

"I still owe you," Llenor insisted. "And wish I could pay you back."

"You will." Amanda said it without the slightest doubt.

Really? How? Amanda's hand was still on her shoulder, and Llenor was unsure what to say next. She was not used to sharing small wind-blown platforms with the likes of Ensign Amanda. It must have showed.

Amanda laughed, lifting her hand away. "Don't get your clit in an uproar. I don't *do* virgins."

Llenor had just explained how she was *not* a virgin — but with Amanda men clearly did not count.

"All I care about is finding who killed Kia. I don't much care why —

but I want to know who." Amanda's tone made it clear she had loved Bell's hard bitten exec.

"How can I help?" She very much wanted to do *something* for Ensign Amanda — this gun-wielding lesbian angel who had handed Llenor her life back.

"I need a ship," Amanda admitted cheerfully. "And right now one is burning heavy hydrogen to get to you." Gramma Lisa was gunning the reactor to get there, sending Llenor a steady stream of position fixes.

"Ever since the blast, Port Myrine has been zipped tight, with the Banshees locked down, confined to barracks and brothels — but still drawing pay from the Helium Works. A sign someone thinks guns are going to be useful, despite having the 'mad bomber' safely behind bars." Amanda was plainly amused by the notion Llenor could have caused all this havoc.

"And last midwatch the Archipelago Packet came down from Freeport. Now she's leaving with a sealed cargo. No passengers. No regular freight. Something special is aboard, headed for the Freeport beanstalk and Pair-a-Dice geosync station. The first shipment out of Myrine since the blast."

Llenor admitted this sounded intriguing. "But what can I do?" She could not so much as show her face anywhere on the Archipelago.

Amanda gave a winsome grin. "I *have* to know what is being secretly hustled offplanet. That's why I'm AWOL, and you're uncaged. We're going to hijack the Archipelago Packet, to see what's aboard."

Of course. Having added unlawful escape and armed flight to her list of crimes, hijacking had to be next.

Amanda had a pair of saddles stashed in the pavilion. Mounting the rocs, they flew out to meet the *Lisa-Marie*. Gramma Lisa aimed the airship into the wind, with her hangar doors open. Llenor's roc flew straight in, and she dismounted on the hangar deck. Wishing she had never left.

Amanda landed behind her. Evie was there to greet them. So was Wah-tsoph-ki. And Lucifer and Lilith. They had a mini-reunion in front of the huge rocs, who sat preening themselves, waiting to have their saddles taken off.

All debate had been taken care of on the ride in. Some disgruntled family members demanded a vote, but Llenor vetoed it. "The *Prinzess* is already forfeit under Settler Law. Lost to the family. And I need her."

There was nothing left to vote on. Amanda got Llenor off Jailhouse Rock. If she wanted them to fly her to Alpha C, or seize the Archipelago Packet — the only question was how?

("Long Gap," Gramma Lisa decided. "That's the place to stop the Packet.") Long Gap was a 100 klick break in the mountain chain about a third of the way up the Archipelago.

"Why there?" Llenor was still new to crime.

("The Packet has to beat her way high up to windward to shoot the gap. We'll be waiting." Spoken like a true pirate.)

"Sounds good." Actually it sounded difficult and dangerous, but Llenor saw no percentage in saying so.

"We'll need a boarding party." Amanda surveyed the crew on the hangar deck, looking like she did not believe what she saw. Some Chimps, a Thal, two unheavenly twins, and a little edition of Llenor. Not exactly a picked squad of Banshees.

"We've still got the Bugs," Llenor suggested.

"We had the Bugs," Lilith corrected her.

"They're dying," Lucifer explained.

"Mostly dead," Lilith declared. Listening to the Twins could be like taking a one-two punch. "None of them have eaten since the Hive Queen blew up."

"Or moved much," Lucifer added.

"Gramma Lisa is livelier," Lilith assured them.

"But we still have their weapons." A hold full of small arms clearly excited Lucifer.

Llenor looked to Amanda. "How many boarders do we need?"

"Six or seven. Five if they are good."

Evie was out. And Llenor did not want Lilith and Lucifer in any uncontrolled situations. That left only her and Amanda among the humans. "I'll talk to the Chimps."

First she had a word with Wah-tsoph-ki. Thals usually avoided Cro-Magnon conflicts — knowing from grim experience that whichever side won, they were likely to lose. Under Settler Law, any non-humans involved in violence against Homosapiens were destroyed with less fuss than Llenor got. But Wah-tsoph-ki had been with the family all his life. And trusted Llenor. He signed he would do what she wanted.

Pan troglodytes supreme had even less reason to side with humans. The two dozen SuperChimps aboard the *Prinzess Lisa-Marie* were a family group — five males, seven females, the rest adolescents, juveniles, and infants. Only the adult males would be adventurous enough for what Amanda had in mind. Llenor ignored the oldest, who was past his prime and did not stand watches. She made her pitch to the beta-male, always more aggressive, more game to prove himself. The Chimp consented, bringing along a buddy. Llenor had her boarding party.

Amanda grimaced. "They'll have to do."

It took a dozen hours to get to Long Gap, giving them time to rest and get ready. Gramma Lisa worked her way along the leeward side of the Archipelago, staying in the radar shadow of the peaks. The Packet's slow schedule let her fix her moment.

When that moment arrived, Llenor got into her wings and went to the upper deck. Amanda borrowed Eyie's wings, and mounted the two daring Chimps on her rocs. Wah-tsoph-ki readied a paraglider on the hangar deck.

("Here she comes." Gramma Lisa spotted their prey emerging from the ground scatter as she approached the gap.)

The Archipelago Packet was a twin-boomed glider, with hugely long solar-paneled wings. She plied up and down the Dayside Archipelago riding the standing wave. The big solar-assisted sailplane would have to work her way high upwind to cross Long Gap. Fixed thermals partway across allowed her to regain altitude and recharge her solar collectors.

Gramma Lisa waited until the Packet was into the gap and mounting the first thermal, then dumped ballast. The airship shot upward. Altitude readings soared. Standing on the upper deck, Llenor opened her mouth and yelled to equalize pressure in her ears. No solarplane could match the *Lisa-Marie* in a roaring climb. They swiftly had the Packet half a klick beneath them, her big solar-driven propellers flailing at the thinning air. Rocs took off with their Chimps aboard. Then Llenor followed Amanda over the side, folding her wings into a stoop, ignoring frantic calls from their target — letting Gramma Lisa reel out a line of bullshit.

("The Captain has left the bridge. Please give your name and message. The next available human will answer all calls in the order...")

Llenor's navmatrix locked on for landing, reading off the dwindling distance. 400 meters. 300 meters. 200 meters...

The Packet's primary control position was on an airfoil section between the two fuselage booms. Flaring out her wings and lowering her tail, Llenor stalled at the last instant. Adhesive boots hit the wing section and she told them to hold. She had boarded the Packet.

Amanda landed beside her, an anaerobic torch in her hand. Together they attacked the tear-drop canopy protecting the main control position.

Thrown into defensive mode, the Packet did a wingover, spinning on her central axis. Crouched over the canopy, held in place by her boots, Llenor saw clouds and sky whirling out the corner of her eye. Ignoring the spin, Amanda cut through the canopy. Llenor reached in, disabling the autopilot and security system, plugging a transceiver into the control circuit.

Instantly her navmatrix was flying the Packet. Putting the controls in neutral, she leveled off. The Packet ceased spinning, climbing back into the thermal.

Amanda hefted her torch. "Let's see what we got."

"Passenger side first." Llenor nodded at the port boom.

Amanda clumped over and started cutting. Llenor compensated, keeping the glider on an even keel. The rocs with their armed Chimps aboard took up stations on either wing, ready to give covering fire. Wah-tsoph-ki positioned his paraglider behind the Packet. As soon as she had cut a human-sized hole, Amanda called out, "Cover me," triggering a gas grenade.

"Take over, bosun," Llenor ordered, letting Wah-tsoph-ki fly both gliders from his tail position. She shrugged off her wings. Kneeling to steady herself, she aimed a laser glove at the hole in the port boom.

Slipping a gas mask over her face, Amanda tossed in the grenade. And a second. White irritating vapor boiled out of the port boom, forming a billowing plume behind the big glider. Wah-tsoph-ki had to fall off to starboard to keep flying both ships. Whenever the plume slackened, Amanda stoked it with another grenade.

"They're coming out," Amanda shouted through the mask.

Climbing atop the boom to give Llenor a clear shot, Amanda reached down into the smoke, grabbing an emerging figure by the jacket. The man was wearing a mask, but the burning vapor must have gotten under his clothes. No one could hold out in a confined space full of really nasty gas.

"How many are there?" Amanda demanded. "Don't lie, or you are dead."

"Only me," he gasped.

Amanda tore off his mask, making sure he got a whiff of the gas — to make him more tractable. Then she pulled him out. He clung sputtering to the smooth airfoil, held there by Amanda. If she so much as relaxed her grip, he would go sailing off between the booms.

It was Bell.

Seeing him through the sights of her laser glove, Llenor hardly believed it at first. She let the glove fall — overcome with relief. He was alive.

"Keep him covered," Amanda screamed. "The bastard may have backup in there."

Llenor hesitated, her happiness at seeing Bell crowded out by serious questions. How had he survived? What was he doing here? Reluctantly she raised her glove, but doubted she could fire. Bell was not some deranged Bug. He was the man she loved. There was bound to be an explanation.

Keeping Bell pulled back and off balance, Amanda let the gas thin, then took a quick peek into the passenger boom. She jerked her head back out. "No one."

Ripping off her mask, Amanda drew her machine pistol, jamming it against the back of Bell's head. Amanda's small body shook with rage. White knuckles gripped the recoilless pistol. "No witnesses. Right? You killed Kia, didn't you — and meant to get clean away? You sorry son-of-a-bitch."

Clearly Bell had escaped the bomb, but how? Llenor remembered the blinding flash before the blast. And Kia crumpled at the lock door. There had been a moment when Bell could have dived inside the armored box, leaving the bloody helmet as a dramatic bit of misdirection.

All Llenor could think to say was, "Why?"

Her question was addressed to Amanda, but Bell's lips curved into a familiar smile. "Someone's got to stop you." He said it slowly and simply. Just as if it made sense.

Llenor stared at him, "Stop who?"

"Stop you. You're sick. Dealing with Bugs. Living with Chimps. Fucking Thals. Making half-breed monsters."

Unable to speak, Llenor felt almighty sick. Just like Bell said. Thinking about "traces of nitrates on your clothes and body." Not to mention the primer and detonator in her cuff.

Bell drew his legs under him, getting back his balance. "Surprised that I fucked some test-tube bitch? Don't take it personal. I did what I had to."

Llenor's finger twitched inside her laser glove.

He looked over his shoulder at Amanda. "Someone has to save us. This planet was made for humans — like you and me."

"And Kia. You hypocritical asshole." Amanda looked over at Llenor. "I vote we get it over with. Grease him now."

"No, wait!" Llenor lowered her glove.

"Why?" Amanda looked genuinely puzzled.

"We've got to take him back."

"What for? A fair trial? You saw how the courts work. Do you think he did this *alone*? We need to waste him *now*!"

"No!" Llenor insisted. She wanted to shove Bell into their smug Settler faces. The man they claimed she killed. The Xenophobe that did not exist. "We need to take him back."

"That's one thing you'll never do." Bell twisted about, slipping out of his jacket, spoiling Amanda's aim. Before she could recover, he dived backward between the booms.

Llenor lunged to grab him. Too late. The slipstream whipped him out of reach. Bell lay on his back, sprawled in midair, then he curled himself into a ball to speed his fall.

Headed straight for the fiery surface.

"Damn!" Amanda sat crouched atop the passenger boom, holding Bell's empty jacket — watching him dwindle, becoming a dot on the cloud plain. "Say hello to Elvis, you fucker."

The rocs dived after him. But with heavy Chimps on their backs, they would be hard put to seize someone who did not want to be grabbed.

Bell disappeared into the clouds below. Slowly the rocs came circling back.

Prospero stands high over Mount Aphrodite — higher even than over Myrine — basking the great emerald peak in eternal summer. Flocks of fat

doves circled the summit. Migrating silverwings streamed past, headed sunward.

Llenor was not on Aphrodite proper, but on Cythera, a separate pinnacle that served as a port for Aphrodite. She and the *Prinzess Lisa-Marie* were barred from the peak. Not because the ship was forfeit, and she was wanted for terrorism, murder, assault, sabotage, mayhem, escaping detention — and now hijacking the Archipelago Packet. But because *all* armed vessels were barred from the Mountain of Love.

It was just as well. Aphrodite was absorbed in a ten-day ritual. Revelers scampered over the green slopes, searching out sacred mushrooms and screwing under the sun. Llenor was hardly in the mood.

And there was work to do. The *Prinzess* was refitting, taking on water ballast, preparing to challenge the Storm Belt, and cross the Great Reach. There was nowhere for her crew to go now except sunward, to the Subsolar Plateau. Putting themselves beyond the reach of Settler Law.

Amanda was going with them — having added aiding and abetting to going AWOL. She stood watching as Llenor personally put the final touch on the *Prinzess's* refit. Using her adhesive boots, Llenor climbed up and painted over the "z" in *Prinzess*, replacing it with a "c." So it read *Princess Lisa-Marie*.

Amanda smiled at the forbidden spelling. "It is bad enough having to turn outlaw, without telling the whole world."

Llenor climbed down to stand beside Amanda, getting a better look at her handiwork. Pleased by the illegal English spelling, she told Amanda, "That's what I want to do. I want to tell the world."





BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

CHARLES DE LINT

Dry Water, by Eric S. Nylund,
Avon/Eos, 1998, \$3.99.

WHEN LARRY Ngitis arrives in Dry Water, New Mexico, chased by an obviously malevolent thunderstorm, his troubles are only beginning. All he wants to do is get away from a relationship that went sour back home in San Francisco and find a quiet place to finish his latest novel. Instead, an encounter with the ghost of a Navajo shaman during the aforementioned thunderstorm puts him in the middle of a centuries-old struggle between Raja, a Tibetan earthwitch now located in New Mexico on a quest for a mysterious, heal-all "dry water," and Judzyas, her erstwhile lover who can borrow the bodies of the living and has this thing about killing prophets.

Unbeknownst to Larry, he is fated to find the dry water, which means Raja is determined to use him to find it, or remove him if he

proves unhelpful in her quest. He's also, apparently, a prophet, about to change the world, which means Judzyas feels obliged to kill him. And then there are the ghosts: the shaman, with his own mysterious use for Larry, and the shade of a murdered outlaw who needs our hero to free him from the place of his death so that he's free to "live" a more interesting afterlife.

All of which provides a wild ride for those of us tagging along as readers. Nylund has a fresh, breezy style, reminiscent of Tim Powers at his most outrageous, and proves a deft hand at balancing a complicated, fast-paced plot with fascinating explorations into world spirituality and just plain zaniness. It's true that his characters are a little less fully realized than one might wish for, but he makes up for this with endlessly inventive plot twists and the ability to root his story firmly into its setting.

Whether describing Seco County, New Mexico, where most

of the action takes place, or historical France and Spain, which we visit on brief excursions, the locations are wonderfully realized.

At the special price of \$3.99, *Dry Water* proves to be a very affordable introduction to a relatively new voice in the field.

The Antelope Wife, by Louise Erdrich, Harper Flamingo, 1998, \$24.00.

Where to begin?

Erdrich's latest novel is such a rich tapestry of a book, cutting across family generations and various times in history, that any attempt to explain its plot in simple terms runs the risk of making it all seem far too complex and bewildering for easy reader access. This is truly one of those cases where, if the author could have made her point in a few pithy sentences, there'd have been no reason to write a whole book. But there is no one single point. Like the best novels, *The Antelope Wife* sweeps us up into many stories, each with its own issues to explore.

There is, however, a thread that leads from beginning to end, beaded with all these stories and the characters inhabiting them. Part of that thread is the background setting of

Minneapolis and the nearby reservations from which native people have been continually drawn to what was once an important trading center and hunting ground, and is now a concrete metropolis. And many of the beads are various members of the extended Roy and Shawano families, whose destinies seem forever entangled with each other, as well as with beings not quite human.

Perhaps the story starts when the trader Klaus Shawano kidnaps the antelope woman at a powwow, bringing her back to Minneapolis as his wife. However, like the selchies of Scottish folklore, such a mystical woman cannot thrive without her freedom, without the wild plains from which she was stolen. Bad luck will fall upon the community where she is being held, Shawano is told. And bad luck will also fall on the community from which she has been taken. But Shawano doesn't care; the antelope woman has become more important to him than communities or family.

Or perhaps it starts earlier, when the cavalry soldier Scranton Roy follows a dog out of an Ojibway village, a dog bearing a small child on its back, a child Roy nourishes at his breast with the impossibility of father's milk, a child who will go on

to live in the wilds and run with antelope.

But wherever it starts, most of it takes place in the city, with this community of Roys and Shawanos, delineating their sorrows and joys, and how their relationships bang up against each other in both humorous and tragic circumstances. And shot through the narrative are wonderful bits of tall tale — native style — as well as myth and folklore, such as the ribald stories and bad jokes told by the dog Almost Soup, the myths of the Windigo people, and a baker's obsession to recreate a perfect cake, tasted once, decades ago. There are the series of twins that run in the Roy family, said to be descended from Blue Prairie Woman, to whom more bad luck comes the further they stray from their true names. There's the tragic wedding, and the hilarious first year anniversary party.

You can see the trouble I'm having here. *The Antelope Wife* provides a rich panorama of character, culture, and ideas in its relatively few pages. It moves effortlessly between urban Indians and old ways, lending a mythic quality to dialogues between, say, a pair of drunk, broken braves, living on the street, or to Cally Roy's — she's the youngest of the Roy twins — con-

fusing quest to find out which of the elusive grandmothers, Zosie or Mary, gave birth to her own mother.

But it all comes together in the end, a stew of humor, despair, and magical moments that takes the false romance and over-wrought sentiment out of the Native condition, but leaves in their place the far richer wealth of a cast of characters that the reader will not soon forget, never mind their cultural background. Which isn't to say that the Native material doesn't lend weight to this magical story, but rather, that Erdrich has given the characters to us as people first, and then gone back to show us how they've become who they are.

Highly recommended.

Going Home Again, by Howard Waldrop, St. Martin's Press, 1998, \$22.95

Howard Waldrop's writing is also difficult to define. He's the master of historical nuance and detail, a writer gifted with the ability to take any number of seemingly disparate elements and, not only have them make sense in context with one another, but make us feel that they always belonged together. Who else could put the Keystone Cops, Oswald Spengler, fa-

mous movie monsters, and Wandering Angus together in one story? ("Flatfeet.") Or how about Fats Waller, Thomas Wolfe, giant dirigibles, and the Tokyo Olympics? ("You *Could* Go Home Again.") Or Bertolt Brecht, the Three Stooges, Peter Lorre, and an alternate-Nazi plot? ("The Effects of Alienation.")

He's audacious, too. Imagine rewriting "A Christmas Carol" as an sf story, interspersing it with a fascinating alternative biography of its original author. ("Household Words; Or, The Powers-That-Be.") Or retelling the old fairy tale "The Brementown Musicians" where the animal musicians are a group of hillbilly musical saw players and the gang of outlaws is made up of Hans Christian Andersen, the Brothers Grimm, etc., suitably gussied up as Chicago gangsters. ("The Sawing Boys.")

Waldrop gets away with this sort of thing because, no matter how outrageous the collisions of his subject matter might be, you

also know he's researched the heck out of the material. And it works. He's also got a pure gift of storytelling so that characters are absorbing from the moment they step onto the page. Waldrop's stories aren't simply odd curiosities (though there's plenty of that to be found in them). They're *about* something, each and every one of them. Their more eclectic elements aren't tacked on as clever diversions, but deepen each story's theme.

I won't say he's always an easy writer to read. But he's always a worthwhile one.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

DOUGLAS E. WINTER

"Ah humanity!"

—Herman Melville,
"Bartleby, the Scrivener"

THERE IS always delicious irony in discovering fiction that, al-

though resolutely the stuff of horror, has been published, by design or inadvertence or indifference, with the imprimatur of another genre. It's a reminder that the boundaries of horror are not easily circumscribed — even by the genre that wears its name — and that horror fiction is a progressive form of storytelling, one that evolves and transforms to meet the fears and follies of its times.

Consider an exquisite short novel by Peter Straub, "Mr. Clubb and Mr. Cuff," which concludes the ostensible mystery anthology *Murder for Revenge* (Delacorte Press, hc, \$21.95). Edited by Otto Penzler, *Murder for Revenge* touts a veteran lineup of crime writers and a time-honored motive, but its

finale descends, with Straub's wicked prose, to a realm of delirium and darkness that is undeniably horror.

Lawrence Block's splendid opener, "Like a Bone in the Throat," subverts most of the stories that follow, tweaking their vigilante mentality with the essential truth: Revenge is rarely simple or sweet. David Morrell's "Front Man" is a wry twist on "Metzengerstein" gone Hollywood, and Joyce Carol Oates delivers the stunningly subdued "Murder-Two"; but their compatriots leave the reader wondering about the point of it all. Mary Higgins Clark's "Power Play" is loopy soap opera, while the remaining female contributors indulge payback fantasies that would be considered noxious if men had penned them with genders reversed.

When we finally reach Straub's novella, there is a sense of masterful transcendence: The supposed realism, too often glib, of its predecessors gives way to a narrative that crafts its own, quite singular, world — a scarred and skewed place whose

"contradictory dimensions" are those of the human condition.

Our unnamed stuffshirt of a narrator is the child of a pious hamlet known as New Covenant. Although he has risen, with the years, to command a Wall Street financial planning firm, he has not escaped the puritanical Protestantism of home: "tattooed within me was the ugly, enigmatic beauty of my birthplace." Complacent in his somewhat suspect success — "All is in order, all is in train," he natters on, mostly to himself — he learns that his young wife has indulged the romantic attentions of a business rival. The solution, of course, is retribution: "Life had not yet taught me that revenge inexorably exacts its own revenge."

Enter the mysterious and unconventional Mr. Clubb and Mr. Cuff, Private Detectives Extraordinaire, whose boorish and destructive nature is everything that is murder, whether performed for revenge or any other reason. Their ministrations, indelicate and extreme, set our narrator back on the path to New Covenant and a kind of righteousness: "I believe that when I strayed, and stray I did, make no mistake, it was but to come home, for I claim that the two strange gentlemen who beckoned me into error were the night of its night, the

dust of its dust. In the period of my life's greatest turmoil — the month of my exposure to Mr. Clubb and Mr. Cuff...I felt that I saw the contradictory dimensions of...what a wiser man might call...try to imagine the sheer difficulty of actually writing these words...the Meaning of Tragedy."

Attentive readers will soon realize that "Mr. Clubb and Mr. Cuff" is an homage to Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (by way of "The Two Temples") — miming its style while inverting the pallid hopelessness of its title character to hyperactive willfulness. Straub's prose is luxurious, alive with cruel beauty, and cunningly leavens a dire scenario with unabashed humor that tips queasily and without warning into unabashed horror.

"Mr. Clubb and Mr. Cuff" is the best fiction I've read in quite some time. Although out of place in *Murder for Revenge*, it is difficult to imagine an anthology that could contain this endearing work — save, perhaps, one which collects the best of a year, or decade.

Evenings with Demons: Stories from 30 Years (Borderlands, hc, \$21.95 trade edition, \$35.00 limited edition) showcases the fiction of Whitley Strieber. Its twenty-five stories include well-known entries

like "The Nixon Mask," "The Pool," and the World Fantasy Award-winning "Pain," but half of its contents is previously unpublished. A major collection from one of the more gifted, yet often misunderstood, writers of contemporary horror fiction, *Evenings with Demons* is an instant collector's item, since its first (and, as of this writing, only) printing sold out in a matter of days.

Strieber's stories, like his best book-length works, challenge (and occasionally reinvent) reality through a deeply personal, deeply internalized worldview that his characters adopt, more often than not, as a mechanism of defense — and then cannot escape. Our planet, Strieber urges, is a wounded Eden whose inhabitants are victimized with cruel inevitability by forces beyond their control — sometimes chaotic, sometimes conspiratorial, and always condescending, striving to put us in our tiny place in the grand scheme of things. "The Resurrection of the Inquisition in P. Salter," written in 1968, offers the reverie of a madman or murderer or saint — or their trinity — who seeks, through the brutalities of the auto-da-fé, to find communion; in the end he is denied the escape of his (imagined?) victims, and must sleep, alone, under a black sky. Even the

least of hopes and pleasures is crushed: In "Under the Old Oak Tree" (1971), a tree that evokes "another time...[a] quieter, better season" hides a fatal secret: "Perhaps it once was an oak. Or perhaps it is something altogether different — not a tree at all." A "tiny, intricate being" emerges from its roots and infects the narrator's thumb, conjuring a corrosive lesion that weeps out his life as liquified fat. In "Falling Apart" (1973), a man awakens with his eyeball in his hand, a preview of the literal breakdown of the human race; but death, suggests the fevered elegy of "The White Moths" (1987), may offer no solace.

Strieber's characters cope, if at all, with their victimization through mania or, more often, a knowing submission to their fate. In "Pain," the frail but suspicious narrator, intent (as is Strieber) on using the novel as a form of political art, suffers damnation by fire at the hands of an angelic dominatrix. His acceptance and endurance bring transcendence — and a rare, somewhat happy, ending: "Once [death] frightened me, but no more. I thought that I was alone, among a select few victims of the sacrifice. But that is not true. Every human being is sacrificed; all death has value." The narrator survives in a life of renewed happiness, even love, but he

cannot escape "a grim ecstasy of suspense":

"I do not hate Janet. Because she has given me a glimpse of what beyond the walls of life is true, I can only love her. I wait as she comes scything down the rows of autumn. Although her call will mark the last stroke of my life, it will also say that my suffering is not particular, and in that there is a kindness. She comes not only for me, but also for those yet unborn, for the old upon their final beds, and the millions from the harvest of war. She comes for me, but also for you, as in the end for us all."

The shadow of Kafka lingers in *Evenings with Demons*, but lies heavy on *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* (Mariner/Houghton Mifflin, tpb, \$12.00), which offers most Americans their first encounter with the fiction of Bruno Schulz, a Polish savant who was murdered by a Gestapo officer in 1942. An artist and art instructor in Droboycz, Schulz produced only two books, both story collections. *Sanatorium*, the second of those works, evokes, from its opening sentence, the complex emotion of horror: "I am simply calling it The Book without any epithets or qualifications, and in this sobriety there is a shade of helplessness, a silent

capitulation before the vastness of the transcendental, for no word, no allusion, can adequately suggest the shiver of fear, the presentiment of a thing without name that exceeds all our capacity for wonder."

Although Schulz's better stories seem beholden to Kafka (he translated *The Trial* into Polish), they are also Freudian, chronicling the antics of a quasimythic "Father" who dominates both story and storyteller. *Sanatorium* is an invented autobiography whose narrator can never quite overcome Father or the cloying adulthood he represents. In its eponymous story, Father's death leads the narrator to a limbo where time is revealed as a trap. In the renowned finale, "Father's Last Escape," the irrepressible Father returns to life, and home:

"By dividing his life into installments, Father had familiarized us with his demise. We became gradually indifferent to his returns — each one shorter, each one more pitiful. His features were already dispersed throughout the room in which he had lived, and were sprouting in it, creating at some points strange knots of likeness that were most expressive. The wallpaper began in certain places to imitate his habitual nervous tic; the flower designs arranged themselves into the doleful elements of his smile,

symmetrical as the fossilized imprint of a trilobite."

When Father makes his conclusive appearance in the form of a crab, the family is suitably perturbed until Mother embraces the inevitable solution: "When Father was brought in on a dish, we came to our senses and understood fully what had happened. He lay large and swollen from the boiling, pale gray and jellified. We sat in silence, dumbfounded. Only Uncle Charles lifted his fork toward the dish, but at once he put it down uncertainly, looking at us askance."

David J. Schow champions a literary predecessor in *Crypt Orchids* (Subterranean Press, P.O. 190106, Burton MI 48519, hc, \$35.00 limited edition, \$100.00 deluxe edition), a collection of short fiction introduced by the late Robert Bloch, who proves, in Schow's words, its "unifying constant." The scenarios are insistently psychological, with little to distinguish their subject matter from the "mystery" and "suspense" of *Murder for Revenge* save for Schow's inventive satire and reflexive self-critique. Like Straub and Strieber, he serves a curiously necessary notice that the emotion of horror (and, thus, the fiction of horror) is not restrictively defined, particularly by a market-

ing category that gained and then lost favor in the 1980s.

Originally titled *Look Out He's Got A Knife!*, the collection opens with three riffs on the theme of the double. "Action" takes Court TV to its logical conclusion, proposing a televised system of justice that hires actors to play defendants in order to assure the wide-eyed masses that crime does not go unpunished. "Pick Me Up" tracks the collision course of two insatiable killers, while the bleak yet moving "Dusting the Flowers" interrogates the roles of murderer and artist as they blur, merge, and (for one of them) reverse.

A "Hollywood Triptych" follows, and it is here, where art and artifice collide, that Schow indulges the prospect of the supernatural. In "Gills," the creature from a famous lagoon finds himself negotiating for a vapid nineties remake, which segues nicely into "Seeing Things," which exposes the pathos known as the test screening as a weapon against intelligent viewers. "(Melo-drama)" is a loving tribute to late night television ghost hosts, the monster movies they unreel, and the duplicity of genre: "Monsters were sub-par entertainment, derided as spook fests, always cited with that knowing elbow-to-the-ribs. *TV Guide* listings told the tale

whenever it subheaded Gravelly's weekly offerings not as drama, horror, thriller or suspense, but as melodrama — meaning extravagant theatricality, plot and physical action over characterization, sensational trifles aiming for the gut rather than the head. Such flip categorizations caused a special alchemy to start bubbling away, independently, in its own secret corner, where responsible grown-ups could not watch-dog. It happened when that word, *melodrama*, suddenly shape-shifted to mean *monster movies*. If you were a kid reading any program listing and your eyes skidded past that magic word, you knew without looking further that you had hit paydirt."

The bitter nostalgia of "(Melodrama)" also haunts "Final Performance," a stageplay based on a Bloch story, which underscores, in turn, the focus of *Crypt Orchids* on the perils of relationships. In a quintessential "trap" story, "Scoop Bites the Dust," and an apt bookend to Strieber's "Pain," "Refrigerator Heaven," the social compact is decried as puerile fantasy: business and government are Darwinian affairs that serve predators, not people. Another loose trilogy — "Jess and Linda," "A Punch in the Doughnut," and "Penetration" — plumbs the moral landscapes of a world in which intimacy can be expressed

only through violence. "Penetration," which considers an obsessive love affair consummated through gunshot, is particularly unsettling and enlightening.

The chaotic reality that Schow charts in these pages reaches a grand finale in "The Incredible True Facts in the Case," a breathtaking assault on the mythology of Jack the Ripper. Schow does not posit a solution so much as dissolution: a concatenation of anarchic mayhem that fate and human frailty have revised and packaged into a history that is safe for mass consumption.

Irresistibly and yet effortlessly postmodern, David Schow's prose brings us full circle, offering horror fiction that is loosed from the bounds of expectation and yet undeniably — indeed, explicitly — intended to honor a giant whose fiction is central to the notion of a horror genre.

The moral is a simple one, really. What is at work in the fiction of Peter Straub and Whitley Strieber and David Schow is a love of great stories (and, in turn, their writers), and not a blind allegiance to the crippling and ineffectual notions of genre. ¶

Douglas E. Winter
Oakton, Virginia
March/April 1998

Albert Cowdrey's last story for us was "White Magic" in the March issue, and since it ran, folks have been clamoring for more from Mr. C. We're delighted to oblige. This dark fantasy takes us again to Mr. Cowdrey's home town and lets us peek into the history of one of the Big Easy's most prominent families. I'd always thought that the dead in New Orleans were entombed above-ground, but Bert assures me that's not so.

The Great Ancestor

By Albert E. Cowdrey

NOT GUILTY!" CRIED THE foreman of the jury that day in 1989, and the courtroom in the New Orleans federal court "erupted in pandemonium," as next morning's *Times-Picayune* expressed it.

My lawyer, who had been nervously fingering some documents, tossed his papers into the air and embraced me. Then my family came swarming out of the spectators' seats and piled on. Little Pierrette, my beautiful little girl, rushed into my arms, crying, "Daddy, Daddy!" My wife Amy gazed up at me with limpid blue eyes. My brother Ned pounded me on the back. My mother, who was weeping, plucked at my sleeve until I bent and kissed her. Aunts and uncles and in-laws crowded around me, weeping, laughing, congratulating.

"The luck of the Carcassonnes!" thundered a hoarse, hollow voice from somewhere at the back of the throng.

Yes, it was a party. Pity my Great-Aunt Kate was dead. She would have appreciated the verdict more than any of them. Truly, mine had been

an ordeal by law. All those accusations in civil court regarding my stewardship at Goldenacres Savings and Loan, and then that final, dreadful criminal charge — that I had procured the murder of the government's star witness!

The media were waiting like a school of circling sharks just outside Courtroom No. 3 that I had gotten to know so well during the long, bitter days of the trial. By this time I knew how to handle them. I let the lawyer talk while I stood holding Pierrette on one arm and clutching Amy to me with the other. When it was my turn to speak I just said:

"This has been a terrible experience for my family, but thank God, the system works. I just wish the government had some better things to do than hound honest businessmen, that's all."

Nothing more than that. You can always give thanks and damn the government safely. Anything else wouldn't have been safe. Above all, you never tell the media what you actually think. They'll use the truth to kill you.

Then it was time for all of us to go to Mother's house for the victory banquet, laid on in advance of the verdict because she, too, believed in the luck of the Carcassonnès.

We were all there, over a hundred people of all ages, filling the house and overflowing on the lawn and surrounding the pool. The caterers were working themselves to death unloading their vans, for Mother's kitchen couldn't possibly have cooked all the food. Our new puppy, Grits VI, got under everyone's feet and barked himself hoarse. The waiters, many of them college kids hired for the day, ran around with their trays like ants carrying pieces of dismembered bugs.

The place of honor was the dining room table where I sat with Amy, Mother, Ned and his wife, and a few others. All the inner circle except Great-Aunt Kate, who was in her grave, and Daddy, who was in New York arranging to sell some assets of the Islamic Republic of Iran. A long, noisy table of us — inlaws and outlaws, as they say — and all of us, I was aware, somehow sounding and gesturing alike even though we were so different. The family.

Even our Founder was there, hanging in his portrait over the table. While waiting for the main course to arrive I glanced up at him — a fierce-looking old man with a cataract of white whiskers. Under the varnish his

suit was shiny black, his eyes were glittering black, and his linen gleamed like a mountain of white ore. The polished brass plate under the portrait said *Pierre Carcassonne. Le Fondateur, 1868.*

He had been there every mealtime while I was growing up. Pierre the Great, Daddy like to call him. The Founder. Founder of what? Ned asked once when he was still little and dumb. Of our family, said Daddy, reverently, and we were all solemnly silent for as much as a minute. Because we all believed in our family. Not in God, the devil or the flag, but in our family.

We lived in the same big house with its nineteen rooms and five baths overlooking Audubon Park in uptown New Orleans. We had formal gardens, tennis courts, and an Olympic-sized swimming pool in marble and tile and a bronze lion-head that gushed cold green brine from our own artesian well. Money that Daddy had made by helping the Shah of Iran to invest a tiny part of his billions in Louisiana had paid for the well and the pool, so we called it the Shah's Pool. The deal with Teheran was part of the family legend. Other aspects of the legend — the important people we had met, the money we had made, the secrets we knew — sparkled in the backs of our minds like the paste jewels in the glass case in Aunt Kate's living room on Prytania Street that marked the time she had been Queen of Astarte, the *best* women's carnival krewe. No Carcassonne had yet been Rex, King of Carnival, but surely that would come in time.

Ultimately everything we had derived from Pierre the Great, who had emigrated from Toulouse or Marseilles or someplace in the early nineteenth century and become a cotton factor and speculator. Though we knew little about him, some of his oddities were remembered — for example, the fact, remarkable for those times, that he had refused to own slaves. For whatever reason, he had been no friend of the Confederacy or the southern war effort. During the Civil War when others were going bankrupt most of his wealth had reposed comfortably in the Bank of England, earning more money than in the postwar depression had enabled him to buy up valuable sugar land for a song. His sons and grandsons made more money by investing in the brand-new oilfields of the Gulf and Texas.

In Daddy's generation the Carcassonnes were doctors, lawyers, investment bankers, and stockbrokers. They divided the inheritance but also multiplied it. They called themselves "the hundred cousins" and

together with their spouses they possessed about nine billion dollars. My generation generally followed their parents into business but also did some offbeat things, producing among other oddballs an artist who sold bad paintings for exorbitant prices and a drug-runner who never wound up in the penitentiary, although he probably should have. They too shared the luck of the Carcassonnés.

I was a bookworm as a child and for a long time I was drawn to the study of history. Daddy was not too happy over that, pointing out to me that there was no money in it. He probably thought I lacked the courage to do more adventurous things, and in that he may have been right. But when I persevered, he told me to go ahead, warning me however that my trust fund would not be a nickel larger than Ned's, whose goal was to become an investment banker.

I think it was the general air of polite disapproval at home that caused me, in 1970 when I was in my first year as a graduate student at Tulane, to become interested in writing a biography of Pierre the Great. I secretly hoped to demonstrate to Daddy that my profession could add, however slightly, to the luster of the family name.

The first thing I found out was that tracking down Pierre Carcassonne was surprisingly difficult. For a family as narcissistic as ours, we turned out to own little in the way of papers. Interesting papers, anyway. Account books, yes, we had those, by the dozen. From ledgers of the 1850's I could see how Pierre had shifted his money around, crisscrossing the Atlantic with his interests, moving cotton between the New Orleans warehouses and those in Liverpool and banking the profits on Threadneedle Street in the City of London and using them to speculate on the Exchange and the Bourse.

He obviously had believed that the United States of his day was a great place to make money but a very poor place to store it, and a series of panics and depressions and bank failures culminating in the disasters of the Civil War proved him right. At any rate, he never ended a year without posting a profit, including even the calamitous year 1862, when New Orleans fell to the federal fleet.

But where were the letters and diaries that alone can make a dead person come to life? I could find none, except copies of business letters which were only a bit less boring than the account books. I had real hopes of Aunt Kate, but she put me off, saying that her house was such a mess

she could find nothing in it. Other relatives came up only with bits and pieces. A letter consisting in its entirety of the words "Yours of the 7th inst. rec'd and I thank you for it" tells you little about the writer except that he was terse. I finished the meager materials stored in family safes and desks knowing little or nothing of the real Pierre Carcassonne except that he had been shrewd, and I had known that before I started.

I could not even discover where he was buried. In Metairie Cemetery the Carcassonnes had a pompous family vault with walls and roof of granite and a green bronze lady in a robe mourning beside the door. But the first people to be buried there were Daddy's grandparents. Some earlier members of our family reposed in an uptown cemetery across from Commander's Palace restaurant — very convenient, Daddy liked to say, if their appetites were anything like those of my brother and myself! But Pierre the Great was not there, nor did he seem to be anywhere else.

On my hours off, when I was neither lecturing at Tulane nor being lectured to, I poked around in the older cemeteries, hoping to get lucky. Soon I made a number of new acquaintances among sextons and caretakers, and among a curious collection of people who were victims of genealogical obsessions. These students of the past moved in hunched postures from gravestone to gravestone, copying names and dates; they made rubbings of interesting epitaphs and the quaint carvings — winged hourglasses, weeping willows, sorrowing angels — that Victorian stonemasons used to memorialize grief. I liked the genealogists because they, too, believed in the importance of family, even if they had to support their dreams by fantastic efforts to connect their ancestors to the Romanoffs or the Borgias.

The genealogists and I would bring po'boy sandwiches in brown bags and eat lunch among the tombs, sitting on marble benches under the big old trees and breathing deeply in the murmurous summer silence that reduced the noise of the city to a distant beelike hum of traffic. One day I was munching my sandwich in St. Louis Cemetery No. 3 and talking to a tatty old lady who claimed to be descended (by the wrong side of the blanket) from the Archduke Francis Ferdinand. The archduke, she said, had been on the verge of legitimizing her grandfather when Ferdinand's assassination and the First World War put an end to the project.

"It preyed on Grandpa's mind," she said. "Not that being illegitimate

bothers anybody anymore, but he was of the old school. He studied French in order to write his own diplomatic dispatches in case the Hapsburg throne should ever be re-established and his claim to it recognized. His last words on earth were, *Hélas! Je suis toujours un bâtard.*"

That seemed sad to me, being forever a bastard. Since she had confided in me, I told her about my search for the grave of my great-great grandfather, Pierre Carcassonne, and my fear that he must have died outside the city, since I could find no trace of him in New Orleans.

"That's an unusual name," she said thoughtfully. "Now, where have I seen it before?"

I was about to suggest that our family was locally prominent and often mentioned in the newspaper. But then she brightened and exclaimed, "Oh, I've seen that grave!"

"You have!"

"Oh, yes. I often forget faces, but I never forget a grave. Now let me see...it was in...it was in.... Oh, I know. It's in the St. Dismas cemetery, on the Basin Street side somewhere. Yes, I'm sure it is. It's not in very good condition, I'm afraid."

Candidly, I did not believe her. But I wanted to believe, and a little light had switched on in my head when she said St. Dismas. This was indeed a very old cemetery, once located just outside the ramparts when New Orleans was still a fortified town. But it had soon become a burial ground for people of dubious antecedents, including some of Jean Lafitte's pirates. It also held many of the city's free blacks. Many had been people of wealth and education, highly respectable and much respected. But they, too, had had their bad apples, including a couple of voodoo queens buried in marble tombs that people still marked with red crosses, hoping to keep the witches inside.

It seemed to me as I thanked my friend for her help that one of the obscurities surrounding Pierre the Great — his refusal to own slaves — might be clarified if he turned out to have been a mulatto or quadroon who had married a white woman. Of course, such a union would have been illegal at that time, but wealth finds a way, and the number of local white families with black ancestors is almost as large as the number of blacks with white forebears.

As I reflected on the features of the old patriarch in the portrait, I could

find neither support nor refutation for my idea. Were the lips hidden in that cascade of moustache and beard as thin as Europe or as full as Africa? No telling — and the painter had probably adjusted both features and coloring to accord with the wishes of his model.

Nevertheless, as I drove to Basin Street I was almost humming with excitement. I was without conscious racism myself, and since Daddy had predicted that the next Mayor of New Orleans would be a black Creole I could see no reason for anyone to be ashamed of such a connection any longer. I particularly relished the thought of how my more pompous relatives, who scorned history as a useless pursuit, would be floored if I turned up clear evidence that the Founder had been partly black! I was still young enough to relish the sheer shock value of such a revelation.

I will not waste time telling of my slow and somewhat dangerous search for Pierre's tomb. *Dangerous* because the neighborhood had gone bad and I would not have dared to go there alone at any time but the afternoon of a sunny day when well-guarded tourist parties could be expected to arrive also. Suffice it to say that after several anxious and muddy hours spent mostly on my hands and knees, I discovered at last what appeared to be the grave of the Founder.

It was much smaller and in much worse condition than I had expected — merely a chamber of very old, weathered and broken brick, cracked by the roots of trees that had themselves died and become part of the cemetery earth generations ago. There were no remains inside, only a bundle of old newspapers reduced by damp to papier maché, which showed that a derelict had been sleeping there at some time in the not too remote past, with a wad of newsprint for a pillow. A broken and dislodged square of marble lying beside it was much eroded by the rain and the words cut into it were only partly legible:

PI . . R . CARCASSONNE
 NÉ LE 2ME AO 8
 DE . EDÉ L. 31RE OC , 18 . 8
 ODER . . T DUM MET . ANT

The French part of the inscription was easy: *Pierre Carcassonne/Né le 2me Aout,...8/Décédé le 31re Octobre, 18 . 8*. In English, he was born

the second of August in a year ending in 8 and died the thirty-first of October, probably in 1868, the year of the portrait. This suggested to me that he knew the end was close and had had the picture painted in order to fix his image in the minds of his descendants.

The Latin epitaph, apparently *Oderint dum metuant*, was a poser. My Latin was poor, but after digging out a grammar I had used in high school I decided the words were Caligula's famous remark about the Romans: "Let them hate me, so long as they fear me." That struck me as a strange sentiment to inscribe on a tombstone.

In any case, I had a good deal more information than I had possessed before arriving at St. Dismas. I had brought a polaroid camera with me and I took the whole roll of film of the vault and its surroundings. My last happy discovery of this eventful day was that my car had not been stripped while I was in the cemetery, though I did have to pay five dollars tribute to a teenager carrying a baseball bat who claimed to have been guarding it for me. Cheap at the price, I thought, as I drove off, for I had at last touched something tangible belonging to Pierre Carcassonne, even if it was only an empty grave.



THOME I played with Grits IV, recently installed as the family dog following the tragic death of Grits III under the wheels of a concrete mixer. He was a young Schnauzer, with a short beard and a merry bark. He accompanied me to my bathroom where I took a much-needed shower and when I had dressed we went down to the dining room where I stared possessively at Pierre. Yes, I decided, his skin was definitely rather dark. I had to admit that the hue might indicate old paint or a bad liver rather than what in 1970 we still called a touch of the tarbrush; nevertheless, I felt that I had come closer to him than any of my many relatives.

Daddy deflated me, however. He was simply not interested in what I had discovered.

"That's not where Pierre was buried," he said flatly, after glancing at my photos. "He wouldn't be buried in a hole like that. Anyway, why would he be in Dismas? Nobody we ever knew is buried there with all those voodoo queens and pirates and whatnot."

He even dismissed the evidence of the marble slab, and I had to admit

that in the Polaroid picture the lettering looked all but meaningless.

The question was how to get more evidence. I considered going back and stealing the marble slab, but rejected the idea on ethical grounds, for in those days I still had ethics. Instead, I resolved to seek documentary information, and on my next free day I went to the French Quarter to work in the General Ferd Blister Collection. This choleric retired officer, made rich by oil discoveries on vast tracts of inherited swampland, was whiling away his golden years by buying a huge volume of memorabilia — pictures, manuscripts, indeed almost anything — that dealt with New Orleans in what he called "the good years" before the suppression of legalized prostitution. I introduced myself and was respectfully received by General Blister's archivist, a translucent young man named Dave who seemed only half alive, and hence all the better fitted to preserve and interpret the records of the dead.

"General Blister," Dave muttered, eyeing a point in distant space, "would really like to get hold of some Carcassonne family papers."

"So would I."

"Surely they must be somewhere."

"All I can find is old account books." I then explained that I hoped to track down references to Pierre Carcassonne through mentions in the papers of his contemporaries.

"I think," Dave whispered, "I think...yes...I ran across some mentions when I was accessing the Dubroville Papers. And the DeSaye Papers. And the Worthe Papers. Hm. Hm." He wandered off muttering to himself and eventually returned with half a dozen gray document boxes.

He relieved me of my pen, issued me foolscap and a short hard pencil to take notes with, and sat me in a corner of the dark, somewhat dungeon-like room that General Blister allotted to researchers in his collection. In fact, it had once been a dungeon, for iron rings were still set in the old brick walls and a spiked metal slave-collar dangled menacingly from a short length of chain.

Here I spent the whole of a long day on my self-imposed quest, laboriously panning out a few glistening grains of gold from the verbal torrent of 19th-century letter writing. The Dubroville Papers were the most revealing, because a member of their family had fought a duel with Pierre Carcassonne. Here are some of my notes:

Honoré Dubroville to his wife Claudette, November 2, 1857:

"Ah, my dear, if only you were here in New Orleans, to give counsel in this crisis! My nephew Louis wishes to challenge that accursed wretch Carcassonne to a duel. I have earnestly advised him not to do so, for a duel can be held only between gentlemen, no others being able to dispute a point of honor. As to the danger of fighting such a man, I said nothing: danger would only spur the young firebrand on."

Same to same, December 13, 1857.

"That ill-considered duel! An honorable young man is no more, while Carcassonne continues to flourish like the green bay tree and is more insufferable than ever. In addition to being a pig and a camel, he is now an assassin, too."

Various other comments followed, all uncomplimentary. During the federal occupation of the city, the Founder had proclaimed himself a Unionist and worked hand in glove with the corrupt General "Beast" Butler, to the great profit of both, according to the Dubroville. The last reference to Pierre was an almost fiendish burst of glee when, after the war, my ancestor died of unspecified causes.

Claudette Dubroville to "Mon très cher mari," All Saints' Day [November 1], 1868.

"How unfortunate that you are away from home at so happy a time! We are rid of Carcassonne at last!!! Surely the family will have a closed coffin at the wake. They will be lucky if the consecrated earth does not vomit him up!! For his children I am not sorry either, they are all limbs of Satan. True, we are commanded by the good God to forgive, but surely not the Carcassonnes."

Such malice was rather daunting. As Dave brought me more boxes from other collections of letters, my dismay increased. I had grown up in the firm conviction that my family was in every sense honorable and respectable, yet it seemed increasingly that the Founder's contemporaries did not agree. Reluctantly, I admitted to myself that fathomless unpopularity had enveloped old Pierre. He was called everything vile — a cheat, a blackguard, a swine, a murderer, a thief, a rascal, a roué, and a Republican. To add to my discomfort, in all this catalogue of denunciation no reference was ever made to his race — and, if he was black, that seemed strange, given the attitudes of the time. Perhaps my whole theory of a

black man on the rise who virtuously refused to own slaves because they were members of his own race was wrong.

I returned home from my day in the Quarter in a thoughtful mood and settled down with Grits IV and a drink to await the return of my father from his day's occupation. He had successfully managed some intensely complicated transaction or other between two banks and was in a relaxed and pleasant mood. He patted the dog, praised the martini I mixed for him (he was very exacting about martinis) and asked me how my researches on the Founder were coming.

For reply I handed him the foolscap sheets on which I had jotted my notes and he read them with the close attention that a lawyer always gives to a written document.

"Not widely loved, was he?" he murmured, handing them back.

"No. Somehow it's not what I expected. I thought he'd be respected, at least."

"Too successful, I suppose," said Daddy somewhat heavily. "A little success has many friends, but a big one has many enemies."

I couldn't buy that, even dressed up in one of Daddy's instant wise sayings. Pierre Carcassonne had been *hated*. I pointed this out.

"And yet in these documents nobody ever says exactly why. They just heave insults at him."

"That's because back then everybody knew why. My adviser at Tulane tells me it's something historians run into time and again. What everybody knows, nobody ever bothers to say. It can be terribly frustrating."

The next bit of evidence came from a completely unexpected source.

Jake Touro kept one of the last great junk-shops in New Orleans. A pleasant, dumpy man of no special age, he was literally unable to let any object that could be physically inserted into his tiny shop escape him. For reasons of space his collection contained no antique locomotives or stuffed whales; but he had everything else, especially if it concerned New Orleans.

Jake had already marked me down as a potential customer, and I got a call from him one morning as I was preparing to leave to take an exam at Tulane.

"Jake, I don't have much time."

"Sure, sure, sure. Just wanted to let you know I've got a pitcher you

might want to see. Carcassonne stuff, middle of the last century. Interested? Ha. Thought you might be."

As a matter of fact, at three that afternoon I was edging into Jake's Treasure Chest on a side street off Esplanade. *Edging* because the junk was piled so high and deep and close that I had to go sideways or not at all.

"Let me put on the lights," muttered Jake, emerging from a back room. He had ten or twelve gooseneck lamps scattered around and with a good deal of ballet-like twisting and toe-standing he managed to turn most of them on. Then he sidled behind a counter and started rummaging in a collection of shoeboxes.

"Ah," he said, "system never fails."

He pulled out a gutta-percha box with an arcadian scene stamped into the lid, and flipped it open. Inside was a tintype of Pierre, so faded that I had to turn it from side to side under one of the gooseneck lamps before the image emerged. But then — what an image!

Only his face and one hand rose from the gleaming blackness of the plate. The hand was huge and gnarled and rested on a cane whose head was a massive knob of ivory carved in the shape of a snarling dog. Whenever the image was taken, Pierre had been clean-shaven; his nose was a raptor's beak and his face was set in a ferocious expression, the eyes fairly starting out of the head as he glared into the camera. I found myself wondering if the lens had not cracked under the intensity of that look.

The painting at home was formal, modified by all the skills of the artist to turn this corsair into a gentleman. The image I was looking at now was, I believed at once, the real man himself as he had been in life.

Voodoo queens and pirates! In death, Pierre had gone to earth among his own kind in St. Dismas. But his kind had nothing to do with race. For it was clear to me from the photograph that Pierre the Great, the Founder of our family, was white — the whitest man I ever saw — dead white, in fact. Then (coming back again to the old question) why had he refused to own slaves at a time when being a master was the sign of wealth and success, the one thing that enabled anyone to exclaim *Je suis arrivé! I have arrived!* with no danger of being contradicted?

Jake wanted two hundred dollars for the tintype in its case. I was able to extract the money from Daddy without trouble, once he saw the picture.

"A tough bird," he said. "I'd hate to go up against a man who looked like that in court. Brr!" And he actually shivered.

He must have talked about my discovery to older members of the family, and they to still others. In any case, a week or so later I got a very old, spotty card in the mail with my Great Aunt Kate's maiden name embossed on it and a few spiky, spidery handwritten lines. She had heard about my success in finding information about the Founder, she wrote, and she had now located something in her house that might interest me.

I showed the card to Daddy, and he was downright enthusiastic.

"She's so old," he said, "that she's a lot closer to the Founder than we are. This is 1970 and she was born in 1890. Her father was Pierre's son; she spent her childhood among people who had known the old man intimately."

The warmth with which he said this made me smile; it was obvious that Daddy was finding history a more interesting study than he had expected it to be, since I had begun to uncover our family's place in it.

As I've said, Kate lived in a big old house on Prytania Street. The house was not on the Uptown Mansion tour; it might have suited a haunted house tour, if our local hucksters ever decided to establish one. From the street the house was simply an enormous thicket sprouting chimneys. English yew had grown up roof-high, and down below aspidistra had taken over all the garden beds. Then on top of this basic jungle had grown thick living carpets of vines — honeysuckle, ivy, cat's-claw, Virginia creeper, yellow jasmine. I remember that the place was startlingly alive in the bright hot sunlight, clamorous with insects and brilliant with flashing jays and redbirds.

Aunt Kate was served and cared for by an extraordinarily small woman named Nelly, who seemed to have invented her own race, being neither black, white, Oriental, nor Latin. She had dry henna-colored tresses, a wrinkled little face like a marmoset, and a great deal of superfluous hair on her face and arms. She opened the front door, peered up at me from not much above the level of my belt-buckle, and then turned away.

On my last visit to Aunt Kate — five or six years earlier — Nelly had announced me with exactly two words, "He's here." On this occasion she said, "Well, he's here," which was a gain of one word. She didn't say them

to anybody, just enunciated in a loud, cracked voice, standing in the dark entry hall with its elk-horn hatrack, clouded mirror, and yellow-brown wallpaper. Then she rustled away like a departing leaf in autumn and left me to find my own way.

I tried the living room, which was very dark and smelled like mildew, and the only light seemed to dwell in the rhinestone regalia Kate had worn as Queen of Astarte in 1948. I tried a few other rooms, and eventually found my great aunt in a large, jungle-shaded back gallery, lying on a spotty chaise longue and reading a battered old book. I knew that she bought second-hand books by weight, and in fact brown cardboard boxes stood all around with piles of books in them, most with brownish pages and broken spines. The one she was reading was called *L'Abattoir* and she put it aside to lay her hand in mine like a long bony fish.

"So, darling, you're interested in Pierre Carcassonne," she said, fixing me with two tiny, glittering dark eyes lying in a nest of bags and wrinkles like gems in drawstring purses.

I said yes, and told her what I'd found so far. She made me sit on the end of the chaise longue while we talked. She was wearing a long-faded robe trimmed with rabbit fur that had probably looked better on the rabbit. Her bony feet were bare but the nails of her feet and hands were both done meticulously with silver varnish. She wore green eyeshadow on her lids and her thin arms were noisy with many jingling bracelets made of what looked like steel. With the hard intelligence in her eyes and her somewhat predatory air, she fitted my image of a successful retired madam.

When I had finished telling my story, she brushed one hand back over her head of thin, clean white hair, setting her bracelets jangling, and said thoughtfully, "Grandpapa must have been the most fascinating man. Of course he'd been dead twenty-two years when I was born, so I never knew him in the flesh."

"He wasn't very popular, I'm afraid."

"I doubt if he cared. He was rich and he had a big family and provided for them very well. As you and I both know. But perhaps you *don't* know. Come along, darling, I've got something wonderful to show you."

She got rather creakily to her feet and led me into the brown shadows of the house. "There are such strange things in this house, darling! Oh, of course there's rubbish, too. Damn all these cookbooks, I never cook anymore, why do I keep them? But also there are wonderful, wonderful

things, hidden away, just waiting to be found again."

She unlocked a door and we entered a little room that seemed to have no particular purpose at all. I helped her clear a path to a big pine cupboard that stood in a far corner.

"Now, you remember this place," said Aunt Kate, "and come back here when I'm dead. I've decided to make you the executor of my will, because you're a historian and because this house —"

She paused to swing her long, jingling, bony arms in encompassing arcs. "This house is history!" she cried in a harsh voice that filled the little room like the scream of a macaw.

We finally got the cupboard door open and a cascade of rubbish fell out — broken dolls, pots and pans, bundled-up papers.

"Shit," she said.

While she rooted I looked around, wondering how long it would take me to catalogue the stuff in this house and how much you earned for being an executor.

At last she gave a kind of happy squawk and brought out an old leather dispatch box with a snap lid. Giving me a secret, crafty smile, she led the way back in silence to the shaded gallery. She cleared a space on a once-gorgeous marquetry table and snapped the lid of the box open.

"Now, darling, you'll find this truly interesting," she said, pulling out with some difficulty — for her wrists were weak — a thick oblong plate of greenishy corroded copper.

"Daddy gave it to me before he died," she said proudly. "He had five sons, you know, but he said to me, 'Kate, you'll appreciate this more than any of them.'"

I picked the metal plate up and stared at it, first in confusion, then in growing wonder. Kate had produced something the like of which I had never seen before and have never seen since, though I think there must be many others, scattered around the world. Some sort of writing had been gouged into the metal. The work had been done either with a steel stylus or — as a forensic scientist suggested, many years later, after viewing it under a strong lens — with the point of a hard, rough, sharp claw.

Before I locked that curious object away for good I also showed it to three alleged experts on the Tulane faculty, who assured me that the language was either (1) Amharic, the ancient language of Ethiopia (2) Medieval Georgian, or (3) Old Church Slavonic. None of them offered to

translate it. Indeed, I can only compare the handwriting to the very worst sort of doctor's prescription. That day in Aunt Kate's I wasn't even sure which way I was supposed to hold the plate, until I noticed the signature at the bottom.

The name appeared to have been burned into the metal with some strong acid and it was perfectly legible. It said, of course, Pierre Carcassonne, and gave the date, *le 31re Octobre 1848*, just twenty years before his death.

I wanted to take the plate with me, but Aunt Kate was having none of that. I would get it when she was dead, she said firmly. And no, I couldn't have it photographed. This was something that should exist only in the original.

"Remember, darling," she said as Nelly waited to lead me out. "Grandpapa didn't just sign that agreement for himself, for his own benefit. He signed it for all of us, for his descendants to the God-knows-what generation. I just don't think it's possible for a family to go on for a century and more *always* making the right investments just by accident, do you? And what's more, avoiding the wrong investments, like slavery, which ruined so many people after emancipation. We're getting good advice, even if we don't know it, even if it comes to us only in our dreams.

"Grandpapa paid the usual price, and I'm sure he paid it gladly. He didn't care much about souls, including his own. He wanted the glory of the body, even if it only lasted twenty years. Goodbye, darling. I'll be dead soon and I'm leaving you the most interesting thing I own for the same reason Papa left it to me — because it'll mean more to you than it would to anyone else."

At home it was dinner time. Mama was talking about debutantes and my brother Ned was feeding his face and occasionally, when his mouth cleared, asking Daddy a question about debentures. That covered the deb front, so I could spend my time eating — our cook, Rawanda, had whipped up one of her greatest specialties, shrimp Creole — and slipping an occasional shrimp to Grits IV, who crouched under the table, whining softly.

I also studied Pierre Carcassonne's face. Had he really done that for all of us, signed that contract so that we could enjoy the good things of the world for centuries or forever, while he paid the price? Even that poor tomb — had it been a mere formality? Had there been anything left to bury after the contract fell due and the Creditor came to collect what was owed

him? How could anybody do more for a family than that?

That afternoon I went swimming in the Shah's Pool with Grits. It was the first really hot day. Through a screen of azalea bushes I could see the golfers in their superbright clothes moving languidly around the green hummocks of the course. Horsemen cantered by on the bridle path, and a wind like a furnace stirred the huge old branches of the oak trees. Could it really be that we Carcassonnese would succeed at whatever we tried, because we were protected by the contract that Pierre had signed with the God of This World? If so, why was I wasting my time with scholarship?

That night I dreamed about the tintage. The dark metal turned into a dark pool and Pierre's big gnarled hand reached out of it and gripped mine.

"Join me!" he roared in a voice incredibly hoarse and hollow.

And so I did. ॐ



"I can't make it. I'm dead."

We surveyed a number of experts to see whether they could tell the difference between this parody and the real thing. Four out of five of them said, "What are you, crazy?" The fifth one said, "Do you really think this story's funny? It doesn't sound at all like me." With such overwhelming survey results, we simply couldn't resist.

Painbird, Painbird, Fly Away Home

a Harlan Ellison parody

By Larry Tritten



UTHOR'S NOTE: THE FOLLOWING was written either while I was taking a shower in a Holiday Inn in Milford, Pennsylvania, or in an attempt to top a memorably

original fortune cookie after dinner at the Shanghai Winter Garden on Wilshire; I can't remember which — my mind was a little muddled from a hectic week that had included writing a Hollywood horror story for *Buzz Magazine* (*I Have No Residuals and I Must Scream*), finishing the novel-length introduction to my 55th collection of short stories (*The Saltimbanque Who Shouted, "Love Ain't Nothing but a Term from Tennis Meaning a Score of Zero," at the Heart of the Universe*); making an appearance as a heckler at a Star Trek convention; and revising my epitaph (namely cutting three thousand admittedly extraneous words and changing it from the third to the first person for a greater sense of immediacy). In any case, someone had either bet me that I couldn't write a story in the shower before the hot water ran out or in a Chinese restaurant before the tea got cold, and my memory is that I won the bet

by several degrees. An interesting footnote is that the story has been optioned by L.Q. Jones, who plans on turning it into a commercial for Hartz Mountain.

— H.E.

Grossiter, though he was in the purest and most precise sense the cause of it all, should perhaps not be blamed. At least there was no malice in Grossiter, that much must be conceded. Call him a scuttlefish, would-be *macher*, blind scrabblar after the world's softest velvets and thickest gravies, neo-Barmecide, dollar-digging money mole. Grossiter was a flack, with a flack's nose for the fragrance of gelt. A shuffling hustler with one eye always on the ground on the lookout for the purse of Fortunatus, the other canted toward the horizon in search of Eldorado. Nobody blames a fish for being wet or a wolf for bolting carrion or a shadow for tagging along. Grossiter was a flack, and as such would have been right at home in the middle of a squadron of B-17s over Regensburg in 1944. Like Charley said at Willy Loman's funeral, "Nobody dast blame this man." Grossiter had to hustle, it came with the psychic territory.

Three miles from Palm Springs, in the desert, on a night as clear as the cellophane candy cigarettes used to come in, stars as bright as cheap costume jewelry lighting the inky skydepths, Grossiter, high on a mix of sensimilla and Johnnie Walker Red, parked his Drambuie-colored Audi Cabriolet, wandered off into the chilly roadside wastes to pay his respect to Undine, and found it.

IT.

That was prologue.

It was madder scarlet in color, as pleasantly resilient as the inner thigh of the most mesmeric odalisque in a sultan's seraglio, and made a sound like a sick horse's whinny played backwards on a lopsided antique Akai.

And there were thousands and thousands and thousands of them all around him in the desert.

It was...*weird*. It wasn't a rock. Wasn't animal, vegetable, or mineral, as nearly as Grossiter could perceive. But he knew he had something. Some...*thing*.

He took it back to his bachelor pad bungalow off the Strip, put it on

a copy of *The Hollywood Reporter* on a table between an empty tequila bottle and a detritus of grease-sheened Jack-in-the-Box fries bags. And struck a pose like Rodin's Thinker.

The thing looked good, made him smile. He had a deep dish hunch it would sell.

Grossiter asked himself why it would sell, and came up with the answer. Pet Rocks. Or, to put it another way, as the Blonde Beast of Baltimore, Henry Louis Mencken, once aptly observed, "Nobody ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American public." Grossiter sensed that it would sell. And would line the pockets of his Ralph Lauren sport coat with portraits of Benjamin Franklin.

What he didn't know was: that's the way They had planned it.

Grossiter returned to the desert with six vans and a work crew, gathered up thousands of the things, and took them back to L.A. He made several more trips. He kept the things in a warehouse in the Valley while he developed his plan: hired an artist who used to work for Big Daddy Roth to design an eyesnaring logo for the product (one with the words Astral Egg in fat pink letters, a design as enticing as that of a vintage Quaker Puffed Wheat Sparkies box); swung a deal to have them distributed in 1,345 novelty shops and toy stores, 839 head shops, and 649 porno stores between Malibu and Jones Beach. The wheels were turning.

Grossiter didn't know, of course, that he was being watched.

By eyes on stalks from a *bialy*-shaped spacecraft just beyond the ionosphere.

One of the creatures, who looked like a cross between Michigan J. Frog and a Shih-Tzu, said, "Zug Z'ag zoomar bryn mawr, snafu xx²?" Meaning, "Is it all going according to the plan?"

Another assured it that everything was ducky, they were just a hop, shtup, and slither from total success.

And: an America that had grown up loving the trivial and the faddish and the whimsical, gimcrackery and fol de rol, trinkets and trumpery, an America with an aberrant sense of wonder, that had been primed for decades by vegetable-dye tattoos, ever-dipping birds, magnetic Scotties, 3D films and Slinkies, that had been conditioned by generations of Crackerjack prizes, magic eight balls and Rubik's Cubes, breakfast cereal gewgaws, Pet Rocks and happy faces, Big MACs and Whoppers, a junk-

conscious America bought Astral Eggs as if they were the hottest thing since sliced *challah*.

The country was titillated, captivated, mystified, and enthralled by the Astral Egg. Touch it, it rocked, oscillated, chittered, whumpffed, chortled, changed shape, seemed to emanate a subliminal sound of music — A Brahms lullaby, The Spice Girls, or Johnny Pulleo and the Harmonicats depending on who was listening. It was more fun than the silliest Putty. No scientist or phenomenologist or mystic could figure out what it was, or why, where it had originated, or how — but nobody seemed to mind, since it was more fun than a barrel of monkeys wearing baseball caps backward.

The President had one on his desk in the Oval Office. Larry Flynt bought one for every judge in Ohio. Paloma Picasso had one and said it reminded her of *Man With a Lollipop*. Both the Mayo Clinic and Andrew Weil prescribed them therapeutically. Stephen Hawking had two. The Reverend Horton Heat gave them out free at concerts. Letterman gave them to audience members instead of canned hams. Barney touted them. Paul Prudhomme tried to eat his.

They sold out. Making Grossiter rich beyond his wildest dreams. And he had once dreamed that he was so wealthy he had a money bin whose depth gauge topped Scrooge McDuck's.

Grossiter made the covers of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Rolling Stone*, and was invited to dinner by Donald Trump, whose hesitation when the check arrived made it clear that he expected Grossiter to pick it up. Women followed him at a lope. He went around feeling like the Babe after that time he'd pointed to the outfield and slammed one out of the park.

And, finally, the eggs started to hatch. And the painbirds emerged.

Swarms and flocks of painbirds everywhere. From the Golden Gate to Ellis Island the painbirds soared en masse over the country, disseminating pain. And death. They looked a little like blood-red Fokker triplanes, with bright bituminous eyes like Iron Crosses, talons as sharp as a Rodney Dangerfield one-liner. Soaring in squadrons. Oil-bright birds with lucent vermilion feathers and fierce little beaks harboring rows of teeth like amber glass. And they had a temper like a pit bull with a thorn in its paw.

The last to die were two winos coming up from the sewer tunnels of L.A. after a weekend with a case of cinnamon schnapps. More birds than

Audubon or Hitchcock could have imagined descended, dark clouds of them, teeth like razors, flashing eyes aglint. Blackness. Finality.

The ship landed the next day in front of the Frederick's of Hollywood on Hollywood Boulevard and the aliens called off the birds, which were taken to thousands of golden cages inside the craft where they trilled with carnivorous contentment with blood dripping from their beaks while teams went forth and pillaged the city, taking all of the cigarettes and ash trays, cans of shaving cream, packages of condoms and chewing gum, jigsaw puzzles and cubes of pool cue chalk they could find. They were just beginning and would work their way eastward.

It promised to be the best haul they'd ever made.

Thanks to Grossiter. Flack. Klutz. Schlemiel. ♪

PENETRATING PET DISGUISES...



CAT



DOG

honey



FILMS

KATHI MAIO

HOLLYWOOD'S LEFTOVER RECIPE: JUST ADD ANGST, AND A TOUCH OF FX

I 'VE NEVER much understood that whole nostalgia thing. ("The good old days" are usually the product of a highly selective memory.) If someone wants to think back upon the past fondly, that's fine by me. I just wish they wouldn't dig up all its physical manifestations, and make me look at them again.

The VW Beetle is one thing, but bell-bottoms, platform shoes, and giant posie-print nylon shirts? They don't deserve a second coming. And certainly not one within the living memory of those of us who had to wear that crap the first time! But, I swear, we're becoming an Instant Retro World, with sixties and seventies pop. cult. exerting an unholy influence on the nineties.

Why? In part, I suspect it's the arrested development of the baby boom generation. (We just can't let

go of our youth.) And as for our kids and grandkids, we've force-fed them the same programming, through television reruns that dominate youth-oriented networks like Nickelodeon and its spin-off, TV Land (among others). It's possible for any number of abominable shows to be even cooler today than when they first aired. It's scary, really. Popular culture fads are recycling at such an alarming pace that films, shows, fashions, and music are becoming hot again, almost before they achieve the old-hat status they so richly deserve.

Did we really need to see *Grease* or *Dirty Dancing* on the big screen again? And what's with all the new disco daze comedy-dramas that are being released? (Hey, John Travolta moved on, and so should the rest of us.) But, at least on some level, those particular projects are — or were — "original." Not so the ripoff

remakes that seem to be everywhere, of late.

I bemoaned this trend three years ago, when I took a swipe at *The Flintstones* in a column. But, since then, the situation has gotten much worse. Disney has taken to re-making its own movies (*101 Dalmatians* and *Flubber*). Live-action versions of cartoons (from the passable *George of the Jungle* to the just-bearable *Casper* to the excruciatingly miserable *Mr. Magoo*) have become a staple of the studios. And so have two-hour re-treads of the sitcoms (*Car 54*, *Brady Bunch*, *Denis the Menace*, *Sgt. Bilko*, *McHale's Navy*) and adventure series (*The Fugitive*, *The Saint*) of the fifties, sixties, and seventies.

Permit me to share a shocking revelation with you, my friends: Most of those shows were second-rate (or worse) to start with. And with Hollywood's law of diminished returns, they usually deteriorate badly when re-cast, re-written, and drawn out to feature length.

Hollywood continues to make them because they're too lazy to develop new material. And, since movies with a familiar name and established associations have a built-in audience, they usually even make money. It's that nostalgia thing. It rots the brain.

Given how I feel about remake

mania, you can imagine my excitement when I learned that New Line was going to do a feature version of that cult TV "classic," *Lost in Space*.

I realize that there are people who are fanatically devoted to that 1965-68 show, but I've never understood why. It was a rehash — of *The Swiss Family Robinson* — from the get-go. Except, in that particular space-age version, the cheery standard-issue nuclear family was stranded on a sandbox planet with papier-mâché rocks and a painted sky that never changed.

Again, cable TV must share the blame for the fact that *Lost in Space* lives on, and on, and on. You can watch it not once, but twice a day on the Sci-Fi Channel. In preparation for writing this column, I actually taped and watched quite a few episodes. And, boy, it was just as bad as I remembered it.

Poor writing, clumsy directing, acting that looks like it was phoned in — it's all there. Not to mention the cheesy costumes (the women look like go-go dancers from *Shindig*, and the men look like they're about to drop by Sinatra's house for a Rat Pack cocktail party) complemented by the grade-school pageant makeup and the pathetic production design.

People sometimes describe the show as "camp," but I don't see it.

The banality of it should be more self-aware and subversive. Oh, there is one "camp" element to the show, and that is Jonathan Harris's saboteur/stowaway, Dr. Smith. Harris created one of the most memorable crypto-homosexual villains of television. (He is a part of a great show biz tradition that includes Clifton Webb's treacherous mentor in *Laura*, and Disney's lazy, bitter Scar in *The Lion King*.) But Irwin Allen and his team were all too aware of Dr. Smith's appeal, and overplayed it. Completely.

The more he dominated the storylines, the more annoying Smith became. And no matter how many oddball aliens (played by some of this country's great — and, in this show, sorely wasted — character actors) stopped by to liven things up, I found the show tedious to watch as a youngster of the good old days. And watching it now, I find it almost unbearable.

So, I was muttering "Oh, the pain, the pain," as I approached my local movie house to watch the big-budget, modern movie of *Lost in Space*. I expected to see a film that was even worse than that TV show of yore. (That's the way these Hollywood retreads go.) But, the great thing about low — and I mean, rock bottom — expectations is that they leave room for a sense of pleasant

surprise. And that's what I experienced while watching the feature film, directed by Stephen Hopkins (*The Ghost and the Darkness*), and written by Akiva Goldsman (*Batman and Robin*).

Make no mistake, *Lost in Space* is far from a great movie. It's not even a particularly good movie. But it's not appallingly *bad*, when you compare it to its source material. So, I ended up moderately entertained by it.

The production values are certainly strong. New Line sunk its biggest budget (some \$90 million) into the movie. And it shows, not only in the 750 CGI effects, but in the film's overall look. They hired some real actors to play the Robinson entourage, too. And then gave them all something to do.

William Hurt plays the intense, slightly supercilious paterfamilias, John Robinson. And Mimi Rogers plays the clan's no-nonsense biophysicist mater, Maureen. (There is something of the dominatrix in this particular mommy, which may explain why she's the only cast member who looks natural in the form-fitting, black latex "cryosuits" the family blasts off in.) In the movie version, daughter Judy is something more than a docile, dishy blonde. Although Heather Graham (recently seen, in all her considerable

glory, in *Boogie Nights*) is certainly both fair-haired and comely. But she also plays a physician with a cool head, and just about has you believing it. Lacey Chabert plays her slightly punked-out younger sister, Penny. And Jack Johnson rounds out the family as the technologically precocious Will Robinson.

Friends star Matt LeBlanc, an actor of, I fear, rather limited range, finally found a screen role he can handle, as mission pilot Don West. (Matt appears to be channeling Stallone throughout the movie, but at least there seems to be a touch of parody in the impersonation.) Presumably on purpose, LeBlanc's machismo is as stiff as an automaton's. Speaking of which, the Robot — so popular in the sixties series — still verbalizes through the pleasant voice of Dick Tufeld. But, initially, "he" looks much different from the cuddly mound of metal and plastic designed by Robert Kinoshita for TV. This Robot is a Robocopian behemoth, all the better to "Destroy, Destroy!" (Only later, when reconstructed out of spare parts by the inventive Will, does he come closer to the original.)

As with the TV series, the casting of the saboteur "villain" is a key element to the project's success.

And the filmmakers chose the very fine British actor, Gary Oldman, to take over the role of Dr. Smith. Oldman's approach to the role is much different from that of Jonathan Harris. Although he is, at times, sardonically humorous, Oldman doesn't go for arch or effeminate. He plays his evil straight (in more ways than one). He's excellent, but not, thank heavens, a showboater. Oldman is simply a solid member of a good ensemble cast.

It's a nice change. As is the filmmakers' modest attempt at suggesting (if not completely developing) all of the members of this Family Robinson. The women certainly have more to do in this version. But it is still the men who take up most of the screen time.

The theme of the film, such as it is, seems to be that the dysfunctional family must heal itself if it is to survive the challenges of life — lost in space, or otherwise. And, in case you miss the message amidst the giant spider attacks and the blast through the sun (yeah, it can happen), Mr. Goldsman makes it quite explicit through lines like "Maybe it doesn't do any good to save the world for families, if we can't save our own."

His primary illustration of familial angst is the relationship of

young Will with his emotionally distant and distracted papa. It would be too easy, of course, just to allow the two to have a heart-to-heart while they're stuck in a closed-up spaceship together for days at time. Oh, no. Mr. Goldsman wants the son to actually denounce the father for his benign neglect. Since a ten-year-old might not be up to such a confrontation, Will also appears in the film as a grown man of the future, who grew up, without his family, on a hostile planet, trying to build a time machine with which to get back home.

The adult Will is played by an extraordinary actor named Jared Harris. (If you didn't see his uncanny portrayal of the title artist in *I Shot Andy Warhol*, I suggest you rent the film.) And Harris is able to deliver Goldsman's psychobabble with such injured sincerity that you may well find yourself caught up in the melodrama. I did. Yet, I was nonetheless distracted by the time paradoxes built into that particular scene. And I was also more than a little skeptical of young Will's nonchalant reaction to seeing his future self as a haunted, damaged, bedraggled man.

It is interesting that a "family movie," about an American family, has come to this. The fealty and devotion of the original 19th cen-

tury novel was transformed into the cheery, superficial nice-nice of the 1960s TV show. And now, the tale of the Robinsons has become soap opera complete with parental guilt and filial self-pity. It's official: we cannot see the word "family" anymore without putting the word "dysfunctional" in front of it — even in a space-aged adventure story.

I guess I would have liked all the *Psychology Today* touches better if I believed that they were something more than a gimmick. But, as the last two Batman movies have shown, Mr. Goldsman pulls out the sturm und drang only to give viewers a breather between the action sequences and the one-liner banter.

Although much different than the old series, there is still nothing original about the movie called *Lost in Space*. It is a leftover hash of the has-been television and sf/horror films of the last thirty years. (In fact, identifying all the borrowed bits is one of the more diverting aspects of watching it.) I didn't cringe while I sat through it. But I found it to be an utterly forgettable cinematic experience.

Not so another film about a lost son. If you want to see a film that really gets under your skin and stays with you, consider Neil Jordan's thoroughly original and

completely unforgettable *The Butcher Boy*. It tells the harrowing tale of a poor lad in early sixties Ireland. Young Francie Brady (the phenomenal newcomer, Eamonn Owens) leads a hellish home life with his suicidally insane ma (Aisling O'Sullivan) and his abusively drunken da (Stephen Rea).

Still, Francie meets life's many challenges with great bravado, and the black humor that has always been the primary survival mechanism of the Irish. He focuses his pent-up rage toward a snooty neighbor (Fiona Shaw). And he takes comfort in playtime with his best friend, Joe (Alan Boyle), and heady doses of creature features, stolen comic books, and television.

But when his life spirals fur-

ther and further into disaster, Francie's popular culture diversions mutate into nightmares and apocalyptic visions. Only visits from the Blessed Virgin (Sinead O'Connor) provide any comfort to him.

The Butcher Boy is certainly not science fiction — which is the only reason this entire column isn't devoted to singing its praises. But the fantastical images that fill Francie's troubled mind lend this tragicomedy a savage grace. Call it magic realism, or psychosis, or both. Or don't call it anything at all. *The Butcher Boy* — both the film and the Patrick McCabe novel on which it's based — defies labels.

It's like nothing you've ever experienced. Isn't that reason enough to see it? ♣

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— SATISFACTION GUARANTEED —

Robin Aurelian's last story for us was the inventive caper story "Jelly Bones" (June 1997). This new tale asks where you draw the line to define the boundaries of the self.

Proxies

By Robin Aurelian

I BLINKED SIX TIMES AND checked the big liquid-crystal chrono that faced the hopchairs in the recovery room. I had been gone for three days, which pissed me off right from the start. Headhopper had only contracted for two.

When I looked down at the body I got mad all over again. Bruises around the wrists, ankles; infected bite marks on the shoulders and breasts. Sick soreness between the legs. Pisswa! I lunged to my feet and then fell back again into the squish-gel cushions of my hopchair. The dark fuzzy cushions molded to cradle the body. I gripped the chair armsupports until cushion stuff oozed up between the fingers. Dumb hopper hadn't fed the body properly.

Those are the worst renters of all, the ones who have no manners and no sense of future. I spend half my waking time working to buff up the bod so someone else can enjoy it, and this is what I come home to? I had Things to Say to that permo-twitch in screening. But first I needed to suck down

a gallon of totalnute, and disinfect and treat the wounds. Who knew what other nasty surprises the hophead had left?

The room still smelled of hopjuice and ozone and transfer jitters, and of the body, unpleasantly. Not even a shower before the hop? Damned hopper!

I looked around. Soft illumination came from a light ring near the conical apex of the room. Consoles and check-screens in the curved dark walls flickered and blinked and uttered small beeps, alive but unattended. Both the flush-mounted doors, one to the corridor and one to a closet, were closed. Footprints hashed the short dark fuzzcarpet on the floor.

The brain imprinter stood like a hunched black metal person behind the hopchairs, its tentacles dangling and its screens blank. The other hopchair was empty. It looked like a dark shiny egg cut in half with an s-curve, the surface of the cut all squish-gel cushioning. Most of the monitoring and invasive equipment was hidden under the cushions.

How come the hophead was gone and I was still here? Not that I wanted to see him or her. But we should be processing simultaneously.

"Hey! Permo-tweak! Where's my rations?" I yelled.

Getting mad is a bad idea when you're a sharebody. I knew that. There were a few minutes either side of a hop when nobody was home in the body, and when nobody was home, burglars and vandals could get in and mess things up. Treat your service people like the tweaks they were, and they could get nasty. And you could never pin it on them. There were always two or more administering hopjuice and catering to the imprinter and the monitors, nothing ever stuck to them.

But when you're an omnimatch and you keep in shape and ask for top megadollar, you don't expect low-class hopheads. I was a top of the line Type O, at least before this hopper messed me up. I could tell illegal mones or stroids had been involved, the way my anger kept cycling and building.

Nobody answered me. Damned tweaks.

I monitored my breathing and did some mind exercises to control spoilsurts and spillers, hophead legacies one often came home to. The anger died down a little. I stretched while sitting, testing all the muscles. Weak and abused. Breathe. Deal with it. Move on.

My attorney was going to squeeze this last hopper, oh yes.

"Hello?" I said, toning the voice down. "Hello? Sorry about that last yell. Leftover mones. I'm not myself yet."

No one came. Violation of procedure. When one is in recovery there are supposed to be service people present until a complete recovery is achieved, proved by matching a brain-wave profile with the original pattern, either the sharebody's or the hopper's.

I'd never come home to such a bad place, not even when I first started out sharing the body and had no idea of what kind of contracts to sign. The recovery room looked like the one I usually woke up in at Class Acts, but a room was nothing. The body was everything. It took caregivers to get you back to yourself. Damned tweaks.

I looked at the equipment embedded in the dark walls. There was a dispenser over there that would give me totalnute and whatever else I needed, if I could get that far, and if I could figure out the programming. I'd never tried to run a Class Acts dispenser before. I wasn't sure using a home dispenser qualified me.

I tried standing again, then sat down. Not yet.

I felt the input on the back of the neck to reassure myself that whoever had hopped me had pulled the plug, unhooked me from the imprinter. Someone had been here to return me to the body. Where had they gone?

The door opened. Someone edged in, his back to me.

"Where've you been?" I demanded, then took a couple breaths to moderate my anger. "I need totalnute. Please. What's going on?"

He turned around and I saw he was wearing a headcam, the zoom lens sticking out in front of his right eye. It focused on me.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"Press," he said. "You the sharebody hosted Livida?"

"What?" Livida, the biggest sensie-star on the continent? Why would she need a sharebody? She looked better on a bad day than I had ever looked.

He came closer. His lens scoped me up and down, focusing on the bruises, the bite marks. Finally he zoomed in on the face.

"Cut it out!" I said, lifting the hands to shield the face, peeking at him between the fingers. Anonymity was in my contract. I appreciated it when I was home, and my hoppers liked it when they were visiting.

"What's the story?" he said, reaching for the hands.

"The story is I can kick you in the nuts and break your headcam if you don't start being polite."

He took two steps back. He flipped the lens up and looked at me with his own eyes. "Come on," he said. "You must have a story to tell. Do you remember any of what happened?"

"Bud, I just got back. All I know is I'm injured, my service people aren't here, and I need rations and healing. You tell me what's the story."

He elevated his eyebrows. "Don't want to pollute a possible source," he said. "C'mon. How'd you get those marks?"

"How should I know? I wasn't here."

"How could you be anywhere else?"

"That's what a sharebody does. Gets out of the body while someone else uses it. You sure are ignorant. What newsource do you work for, anyway?"

"The Tell-All," he said, and I flinched. Dumb-ass news channel, first on the spot with fake facts and harmful speculations. They'd done a piece on sharebodies not too long ago that made us sound like instruments of the Devil, implied that anyone who wanted to keep their souls safe should stay away from us. The story did cause an upsurge in customers, but it scared my sister too. I hated anything that tweaked April's stability. It was all she could do in that broken-up body of hers to maintain her sanity while she waited for her clone to ripen.

"So tell me again, for the record, your side of this whole thing," he said.

"Forget it! And give me that tape you got when you first came in or I'll see you in court!"

"Tape? Shows what you know. My link feeds directly back to the station."

"Tell them they better not use any of that or they'll be in lawsuit hell."

He shrugged and flipped his lens back over his eye. "They're always in lawsuit hell. They live for lawsuit hell. What's your name?"

"None of your damned business! Get out of here! Help, someone!" I looked around for a call button. Seemed to me there should be one around here, even though I'd never had to use one; service people had always been

present when I needed them. I spotted a red button on the outside of the hopchair's arm-support and pressed it hard three times.

Finally a big dark man in Class Act blues came in. "Help, please!" I yelped, pointing at the reporter, and the service guy grabbed him and kicked him out.

"Thank you. Thank you," I said.

"You the one all the shouting's about?" asked the orderly.

"I don't know. I haven't heard any shouting, except from that *Tell-All* guy. What's going on?"

He looked me over, frowned, and went to the wall dispenser. "You haven't had follow-up, have you?"

"Worst wakeup so far. Dumb hophead left me all messed up, moning, and nobody around to give me nute," I agreed.

He brought me a big frosty glass of tickleberry totalnute with a straw in it. I didn't like that flavor. I sucked it up anyway and felt better right away. "Thanks," I said, when I'd finished. I could feel all those nutrients seeping into the system, strengthening me. "Thanks." I flexed the wrists and ankles. Already the hurt was less.

"Better start you on antibiotics," he said, and gave me a shot.

"My savior," I said to this guy. Then: "Is it true, about Livida?"

"Seems likely."

"Livida was in my body? Why? What happened?"

"Nearest I can tell, she just wanted to walk around and not be recognized. She's hopped before, I guess. But somebody squatched. She had a stalker. He found her while she was in your body, kidnapped her, tortured her. Another nute?"

"Yes, please. Vanilla?"

"Sure." He fetched me another. "Weird kind of crime. Now she's back in her own body, feeling no pain, and giving a press conference. And here you are without even a follow-up. Sucks."

"So right." I closed the eyes and drank totalnute, feeling at last a certain peace as systems stabilized. "Hope she doesn't skreek me for the extra day." I could use the money. I was already buying April the best clone you could get, but it didn't hurt to have some bucks put away in case they came up with more and better mods, which they often did. Sometimes I let April headhop into me, but it was expensive—I could skip my own fee,

but I had to pay prep, transfer, and follow-up fees, and every time I did it I was losing income I might otherwise have made. April understood. Every once in a while, she needed a hop, though.

"An interesting problem," said the service guy. "Livida didn't stay away on purpose, unless this was a publicity stunt. Who's liable?"

"Insurance, maybe. Don't know whose, though. They caught the stalker?"

"Nope. He kept her and played with her for a day, then wrapped her up in orange parachute silk, taped her mouth and eyes — sorry, your mouth and eyes, there's still some adhesive; let me clean that up — and dropped her off in the Dumpmaster out back, where one of the cooks found you about half an hour ago." He dampened a rag with some sort of cleanser and wiped it gently over the eyes and mouth. With all the other disturbances in the body, I hadn't even noticed how sticky the face felt.

I licked my lip. "They collect any evidence?"

"Yeah," he said. "He washed you off pretty good, but not completely. Genemap should be ready sometime soon. They'll catch him. How you feeling?"

"Much better. Thanks again."

"Good. You're welcome."

"I was hyped on mones, or maybe stroids, when I woke up. Could you check my balance, please?"

"Sure," he said, and pressed a scanner against my arm. "Mones, huh? True what they say about you sharies, you can taste your own blood without biting yourself?"

"Not exactly," I said. "I just have a real good sense of what I should feel like, and this isn't it." I did some stretching exercises. Strength was flowing back into the muscles. I did some stretching exercises in my mind too. I'd never had a conversation like this with a service person. "This stalker guy, he hurt the body, and he didn't feed it. Wasn't a nice place to wake up in."

He studied the read-out on the scanner. "Hmm. Not mones. Some new kind of crystal. Better get you an evenner." He went back to the wall dispenser and keyed in a request, came back with a hypo, sent its contents into the bloodstream.

"Thanks," I said for about the thirtieth time. I could feel the anger

dying down. Yes! Body was more and more mine again. "What's your name?" I couldn't remember the number of hops I'd made. I couldn't remember a service person who'd been so nice to me before.

"Patrick. What's yours?"

"Marlena when I'm home. Sharebody 209 when I'm not."

"Nice to meet you," he said.

We shook hands. I felt extremely peculiar. I had two friends; both of them had started sharebodying about the same time I did. I had my sister. The rest of the world was full of people who might or might not use my services, might or might not do something for me — training, medical care, hopjuicing, whatever, mostly depending on whether I had credit or not.

Two friends, a sister, now Patrick.

I flexed things, testing, and found that my coordination and strength were at about two thirds normal. "I feel much better," I said. I got to my feet.

"Must be weird, stuff happens to you, you don't even remember it," he said.

I shrugged. What I really wanted was a shower, but that would have to wait. I got my yellow coverall from the closet. I was glad it had long sleeves and ankle-length legs. I pulled it on, took a tie-back from the pocket, and tied my hair into a tail. "It's just...what happens," I told him. "Sometimes I'm walking down the street and someone recognizes me. Talks to me. Reminds me about that night we spent together, or something." I glanced down at the chip implanted on the inside of my right wrist. SB2090 it said, in tiny letters. "Then I show them this. Instant deep freeze." I smiled at him. I didn't know why. I made more money in two days than he could make in two months, and I didn't even have to be awake while I did it. Sure, I put in the work: I kept the body up. Exercise, nutrition, medcare, dental work, skin care, spa care, hair styling. Left me a lot of time to do whatever else I wanted, though.

Mostly sitting with April, plugging in to media, seeing what I had missed while someone else was walking around in the body.

Watching Livida in the sensies, as she romanced, danced, and found pleasures, as she went on adventures and stirred up intrigues. She was always so cool. She was always thinking. She was always beautiful. Never at a loss in a social situation.

When I met people on the street who had known not-me, I wondered how the headhoppers had gotten them to talk to the body. Some of these strangers were beautiful, even. When I was home in the body I would never have approached people who looked like that. I mean, I knew I'd done a lot for my physique, but my face, well, it was just plain. I never had paid for any facesculpting; sometimes people like plain — if it's a visit, not a lifetime.

Once a man came up to me and kissed me. "Gabrielle!" he said, touching my face and smiling down at me.

I wanted to smile back and pretend. But I knew if I did, things would be worse as soon as he figured it out. So I gave him my half-smile, and showed him my wrist. His eyes went wide. He stepped back from me, red staining his face. He turned and stumbled away.

Such little broken dreams, half started, never finding their close because I was not the sum body they had met.

Hopheads shrugged into my body like it was a suit of clothes. They looked like me. They didn't act like me. What was it they did that I didn't?

Livida never had problems like this.

Or maybe she did.

Was her stalker stalking her, or the people she played in the sensies? Did he even know there was a difference?

Did he realize he had split the hurt he caused in half? Livida would remember it; I would feel it.

"Doesn't that seem strange to you?" Patrick asked me.

I couldn't remember what we had been talking about.

He picked up on it right away. "People thinking they know you when you don't know them back. Doesn't that feel weird?"

"This is a big city. It doesn't happen that often." I didn't tell him about walking into a bar and seeing a 3D postcard hanging on the back wall with other bright-colored snippets of travels: me and this fat balding guy, standing next to a strung-up marlin on some fishing boat in the Caribbean. We were both laughing. Well, whoever had hopped into me was laughing along with the Big Sportsman, anyway. His wife? His male lover trying a new wrinkle?

I didn't look at the back of the postcard. "Having a wonderful time. Wish you were here," probably. I found another neighborhood bar instead.

"My face okay?" I asked.

"Clean and no bruises, anyway," said Patrick.

"Thanks," I said to him for the hundredth time. I'd never thanked anybody so much in my entire life. I wanted to tip him really well, but that seemed rude. Maybe I could tip him at a credit terminal downstairs. I checked his ID badge. HURON, it said.

"I better get home," I said. "I hope someone explained things to my sister. But I bet they didn't." Maybe I should call her. I looked around for a link. Not a feature of recovery rooms, apparently.

"She watch the news?" asked Patrick.

"Damn!" That stupid reporter and his headcam!

"You didn't sign a release, did you?"

"Nope. Guy didn't care. Works for *Tell-All*. Said they live for lawsuits."

"Damn," said Patrick. "I'll walk you out."

"Thanks," I said again.

He went through the door first. Then he turned and pushed me back into the room. Lights shone around his edges: cams aimed our direction. Voices called questions. He keyed a code into the doorpad, and the door slid shut and locked. "Press out there like flies on syrup," he said. He lifted his wrist: he had a comlink on it. He touched a button and spoke. "Security?"

"Chief?"

"What are all these press people doing in the secure area on floor 23?"

"Agel gave them the go-ahead."

"Has she lost her mind? This is not exactly positive publicity. Get them out of here."

"Will do."

He flipped the cover down on the comlink and glanced at me.

I went and sat down in the hopchair again. "You're not a caregiver."

"Not generally."

"Huh. Can I call my sister on your wristcom?"

He shook his head. "Internal frequency only. Sorry. We'll be out of here in a few minutes."

We sat quiet for a little while. Presently he said, "Do you know who was supposed to be on your recovery team?"

I shook my head. "By the time I settled in there was no one here."

"It'll be on record somewhere," he muttered. He shook his head too. "They're all fired. Just so you know. Tweaks."

"Fired?"

"Not doing their jobs. Omnimatches are rare! What got into them, leaving you like that?"

"Livida?" I guessed.

"No excuse," he said.

I thought about that. My contract with Class Acts specified certain minimal care, and they hadn't given it to me, it was true. I could jump to some other Headhop Emporium. I could even sue if I wanted to, but it would probably poison the well for me as to future employment. On the other hand, omnimatches *were* rare. Most sharebodies could only be used by one or two of the twelve mind-types. A template like mine didn't happen very often.

April and I were trying to train her clone to be another such, though. April headhopped into the developing body daily as it lay dormant in a wash of nute and thought for its brain so that it would be ready to receive her when it ripened. And I hopped in occasionally and did mind-stretching exercises.

The clonemakers were monitoring everything we did. If we were successful...well, my attorney had patents pending.

The door beeped. Patrick spoke on his wristcom, then went over and keyed in a number. The door opened.

Livida came in, and the door shut behind her.

She looked exhausted. Not how you were supposed to look after returning from a hop. While you were gone your body was resting and being refreshed with the best nute and electrical stimulation available. If you had medical problems they could be corrected while you were out enjoying yourself. Cosmetic surgery. Eye surgery. Mods implanted. Fact, you could wear out your sharebody, if you got that kind of contract and paid enough, and come home to a really comfortable place.

She looked tired, and her eyes were puffy, her nose red. Real crying. She came and stood in front of me, held out hands I had seen in twenty sensies. "I'm so sorry," said that voice. It had a million layers of extra meaning in it. I couldn't think of a single way to answer.

She reached for the hands, and I lifted them. She took them and stared at their backs, stroked a thumb across the knuckle. "These were mine for a little while," she said.

I stared at her thumbnail. There was a nick in the edge of it. I'd seen her hands more times than I could count, felt as close to inside them as I could get without headhopping, and I'd never seen a nick in one of her nails before.

"Ms. Redmond, how much did you tell the press?" Patrick asked before I could figure out why it felt so strange to hold hands with someone I'd never met but thought I knew very well.

"I don't know," Livida said, her voice troubled. "I've never ended a hop the way this one ended. I don't know what happened. I can't remember what I was telling them, only they seemed so much more loud than usual. Usually I feel much calmer, much more ready to face things. Usually my publicist makes sure no one knows I've hopped at all, and there's no press. I can't remember — I can't — I — "

I stood up and steered her into the other hopchair. "It's the crystal," I said.

"But the crystal was in your body," Patrick said. "How would that translate?"

"Disrupted her thinking patterns. Must not have gotten a good brain-wave profile match when they hopped her home. How did they know it was her?"

"I'll have to see the records. There are six topline matches that no matter what your mental state, though. The other fourteen are usually a little waggish." He got out a scanner and pressed it to Livida's arm. His eyebrows rose. "Mimics crystal, all right," he said. He went to the dispenser, got a hypo, injected it into Livida's arm. "This should make you feel better, Ms. Redmond."

She sniffed, wiped the tears from her cheeks with her fingertips. "It's been so awful," she said. "All I want to do is go to sleep.... Oh, that is better. Thank you." She blinked and looked up at me. Her eyes were violet and intense. "Body," she said. "I'm so sorry this happened. Before he caught me it was the best hop I ever made. You are so comfortable, and so able. I was thinking I'd like to use you at least once a month. I'm sorry. I'm sorry he hurt you. I don't know what to do — "

"I'll be fine," I said. "I'll get better. I don't think there's any permanent damage. It's not your fault."

"But it is — if it hadn't been *me* —"

"Just because you do something well in public, that's no reason for you to be punished," I said.

She licked her upper lip. I'd seen that a hundred times too. It could mean any of six things: an invitation to sex; deep thought; uncertainty; I'm hungry; I don't know what to say next; my lip is dry. I was so used to watching her, sensing her, being her, that I forgot we were in the middle of a conversation. One didn't talk during a *sensie*; one just sat back and felt, and waited for whatever would happen next.

Her eyes clouded. "I can't even —" she said. She touched my hand. She reached out and rolled my coverall sleeve up, stared at the bruises around my wrist. "That was real," she whispered. She touched it and I winced. She glanced back at her own wrist, the same color as the rest of her perfect skin. "But now it's not." She let go of my arm and covered her eyes with her hands.

Patrick talked to his wristcom some more. Finally he opened the door and there was no one outside but some security people, and someone Livida called Zachary. She ran to him, and he embraced her; it looked like what happened at the end of most of her *sensies*.

"They've caught him," someone said. "The stalker. They've caught him, Livida."

She wasn't listening, though. She was gripping Zachary's arm. She was walking away. She never looked back.

I never wanted to go for facesculpting, but after that newsbyte from *Tell-All* played on the hour and on the half for a week, people noticed the body on the street. "Livida! Livida!" they yelled, and I didn't know how to answer. They asked for autographs.

So I took some of my savings and had the nose thinned and the eye-color changed, and I augmented the cheekbones just enough to look like someone else. I kept the plain, though.

April still watches Livida's *sensies*, but I take myself out of the net when they come on.

I know her. I know her better than I know myself. She was inside the

body. So many times I was inside her image, living her manufactured life because it was better than my real one. I wasn't in the body while she was, but I lived with the aftereffects of what had happened to her, and that made me feel even more as though I know her.

I watched a replay of her press conference after the hop, and I knew her mind. We'd shared the pain and the crystal and the confusion.

Somehow I no longer know who I am. I don't think she knows who she is either.

Oh, I don't want to be her. It's okay if one person at a time wants to be me, whoever they are when they're being me. But I don't ever want the whole world wanting me. Not like that. ♣

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Feral

By Joyce Carol Oates

1.

*The eyes. His eyes. What was human is gone from them.
What was ours is gone from them.
Where?*

2.

THE CHILD WAS SIX YEARS, three months old when what happened to him, happened.

Derek was healthy, big-boned and inclined to fleshiness, with a soft-rubbery feel to his fair skin that had given him the look, when younger, of a large, animated doll. His hair was silky brown and his moist warm brown eyes blinked frequently. His smile was sweet, tentative. He'd been named Derek (for his mother's now-deceased father) which didn't at all suit him, so his parents began calling him "Derrie" from the start — "Derrie-darling," "Derrie-berry," "Derrie-

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sweet." He had the petted, slightly febrile look of an only child whose development, weekly, if not daily, is being lovingly recorded in a series of albums. Yet, surprisingly, he wasn't at all spoiled. His mother had had several miscarriages preceding his birth and by the age of thirty-nine when he was finally born, she joked of being physically exhausted, emptied out, "eviscerated." It was a startling, extreme figure of speech but she spoke with a wan smile, not in complaint so much as in simple admission; and her husband kissed and comforted her as they lay together in their bed by lamplight, reluctant to switch off the light because then they wouldn't be able to see their baby sleeping peacefully in his crib close by. "God, yes, I feel the same way," her husband said. "Our one big beautiful baby is more than enough, isn't he?"

And so, for more than six years, he was.

3.

If he would see me again. If his eyes would see me.

If he would recognize me: I am your child, born of your body, of the love of you and Daddy.

If he would tell me: Mommy, I love you!

They were devoted parents, not-young but certainly youthful, vigorous. They were Kate and Stephen Knight and they lived in the Village of Hudson Ridge, an hour's drive north from New York City on the Palisades Parkway. Hudson Ridge, like other suburban communities along the river, was an oasis of tranquil tree-lined residential streets, custom-designed houses set in luxuriously deep, spacious wooded lots. At the core of the village was a "downtown" of several blocks and a small train depot built to resemble a gazebo. The Hudson River was visible from the Ridge, reflecting a steely blue on even overcast days. But there were few overcast days in Hudson Ridge. This was an idyllic community, resolutely *non-urban*: its most prestigious roads, lanes, "circles" were unpaved. Black swans with red bills paddled languidly on its mirror-smooth lake amid a larger, looser flotilla of white geese and mallard ducks. Kate and Stephen had lived in New York City, where they'd worked for eight years, before Derek was born; determined that this pregnancy wouldn't end in heart-break like the others, Kate had quit her job with an arts foundation, and

she and Stephen had moved to Hudson Ridge — "Not just to escape the stress of the city, but for the baby's sake. It seems so unfair to subject a child to New York." They laughed at themselves mouthing such pieties in the cadences of those older, status-conscious suburban couples they'd once mocked, and felt so superior to — yet what they said, what they believed, was true. In the past decade, the city had become impossible. The city had become prohibitively expensive, and the city had become prohibitively dangerous. Their child would be spared apartment living in a virtual fortress, being shuttled by van to private schools, being deprived of the freedom to roam a back yard, a grassy park, neighborhood playgrounds.

So ironic, so bitter! — that it should happen to him here.

In Hudson Ridge, where children are safe.

In the members-only Hudson Ridge Community Center.

4.

Had there been any premonition, any forewarning? The Knights were certain there had been none.

Derek, "Derrie," was very well liked by his first-grade classmates, particularly the little girls. He was the most mild-mannered and cheerful of children. At an age when some boys begin to be rowdy, prone to shouting and rough-housing, Derek was inclined to shyness with strangers and most adults, even with certain of his classmates, and older children. As a student he wasn't outstanding, but "so eager, optimistic" as his teacher described him, "he's a joy to have in the classroom." Derek was never high-strung or moody like his more precocious classmates, nor restless and rebellious like the less gifted. He was never jealous. Despite his size, he wasn't pushy or aggressive. If at recess on the playground other, older boys were cruel to weaker children, Derek sometimes tried to intervene. At such times he was stammering, tremulous, clumsy, his skin rosily mottled and his eyelashes bright with tears. Yet he was usually effective — if pushed, shoved, punched, jeered at, he wouldn't back down. His flushed face might shine with tears but he rarely cried and would insist afterward that he hadn't done anything special, really. Nor would he tattle on the troublemakers. Almost inaudibly he'd murmur, ducking

his head, "I don't know who it was, I didn't see." His first-grade teacher told Kate that Derek possessed, rare among children his age, and among boys of any age, a "natural instinct" for justice and empathy. "His face shines so, sometimes — he's like a Baby Buddha."

Kate reported this to Stephen and they laughed together, though somewhat uneasily. Baby Buddha? Their little Derrie, only six years old? Kate shivered, there was something about this she didn't like. But Stephen said, "It's remarkable praise. No teacher of mine would have said such a thing about me, ever. Our sweet little Derrie who had so much trouble learning to tie his shoelaces — an incarnation of the Buddha!" They joked about whose genetic lineage must have been responsible, his or hers.

Yet it worried Kate sometimes that Derek was in fact so placid, amenable, good-natured. Just as he'd begun to sleep through an entire night of six, seven, eight hours while in his first months, so he seemed, at times, dreamy, precociously indifferent to other children taking advantage of him. "It doesn't matter, Mommy, I don't care," Derek insisted, and clearly this was so, but was it normal? At games, Derek didn't care much about winning, and so he rarely won. If he ran and shouted, it seemed to be in mimicry of other boys. Watching him trot after them, eager as a puppy, Kate felt her heart swoon with love of her sweet, vulnerable child. *My own heart, exposed. My baby-love.* She perceived that Derek would require protection through his life and it was her innocent maternal vanity to believe that so good, so radiant, so special, so blessed a being would naturally draw love to him; and this love, like a mantle of the gods, shimmering-gold, would be his protection.

5.

Yet what happened to Derek happened so swiftly and mysteriously that no one, it seemed, could have protected him. Not even Kate who was less than thirty feet away.

"The accident" — it would be called.

"The accident in the pool" — as if amplication were needed.

How many times Kate would repeat in her numbed, disbelieving voice, "I'd been watching Derek, of course. Without staring at him every

moment — of course. And then, when I looked — he was floating face down in the water."

Kate had brought Derek to swim in the children's pool at the Hudson Ridge Community Center as she did frequently during the summer. The warm, sunny July morning had been like any other, she'd had no premonition that anything out of the ordinary would be happening, and the "accident" itself would never have happened if there hadn't been, purely by chance, another commotion in the pool at the same time: a nervous, tearful ten-year-old girl, the daughter of friends of the Knights, had jumped off the end of the diving board and gotten water up her nose and was crying and thrashing about and the lifeguard had hurried into the water to comfort her, though she wasn't in any danger of drowning; Kate, too, had hurried to the edge of the pool, to watch, her attention was focussed on this minor incident, and the attention of other mothers at poolside; whatever happened to Derek, at the opposite end of the pool, had passed unnoticed. Derek had been swimming, or rather paddling, in his not-very-coordinated way, in water to his waist, and (this might have happened: it was a theory Kate would not wish to explore, lacking proof) an older boy, or boys (who'd bullied Derek in the past, in the pool) might have pushed him under, not meaning to seriously injure him (of course, Kate had to believe this: how could she face the boys' mothers otherwise?) and he'd panicked and swallowed water, flailed about desperately and swallowed more water, and (in theory, it hurt too much to wish to believe this) the boy, or boys, had continued to hold his head under water until (how many hellish seconds might have passed? ten? fifteen?) he'd lost consciousness. His lungs filled with chlorine-treated water, he began to sink, taking in more water, breathing in water, beginning to drown, *beginning to die*.

The boy, or boys, who'd done this to Derek, if they'd done it (Kate had no proof, no one would offer proof, Derek would never make any accusation), were at least ten feet away from him when Kate saw him floating face down in the glittering aqua water, his pale brown hair lifting like seaweed, shoulders and back several inches below the surface. "Derek! Derek!" — she ran blindly to leap into the pool and pull at his limp body, desperately lifting his head so that he could breathe: but he wasn't breathing. His eyes were partly open but unfocussed, his little body was strangely heavy. She was hearing a woman's screams — hysterical, crazed.

At once the lifeguard blew his whistle, came to haul the unconscious child up onto the tile and began immediately to apply mouth-to-mouth resuscitation; but Derek didn't begin to breathe, and didn't begin to breathe; Kate stood, dripping wet, staring down at the pale, unresisting body that was her son, her Derek, uncomprehending as if she'd been struck a violent blow on the head yet hadn't yet fallen, her eyes open, stricken with disbelief. *This can't be happening. This is not happening. This is not real.* Then she was being helped stumbling and sobbing into the rear of an ambulance. One of the paramedics, a red-haired girl who looked hardly older than sixteen, was comforting her, calling her Mrs. Knight. They were speeding to a hospital in the next suburb, *and Derek died, in the ambulance he died, heart ceased to beat* yet in the emergency room Derek was resuscitated, heart galvanized into beating again, and he began again to breathe, it would be said *He was saved! Brought back to life.*

Kate had had no time to assimilate either of these facts. The first, that Derek had died, she would see (she would be made to see, by Stephen) was absurd and illogical; he'd ceased breathing temporarily, and his heart had ceased beating temporarily, but he hadn't *died*. It was the second, that he'd been saved by medical technology, "brought back to life" she would focus upon; everyone would focus upon. Her husband, their families, relatives, friends; for this was the truer of the two facts, the more logical, reasonable.

6.

"Your son will assimilate the accident into his life, as healthy children do. He's made a complete physical recovery and he'll begin to forget the trauma if you don't give him cause to remember" — so Kate and Stephen were advised by the emergency room physician who'd saved Derek's life, and whose special practice was, in fact, crisis medicine. Of course they saw the wisdom in what the man said.

Stephen believed they shouldn't speak of the accident to Derek at all unless he brought up the subject. Kate wondered if that might be too extreme — "What if he dreams about it? Has nightmares? We can't pretend it didn't happen." Stephen said, "We won't pretend anything. We'll let Derek lead the way."

Since the accident, Kate noticed that Stephen called the boy "Derek,"

in a faltering voice, as if the very name hurt him to utter. Kate, by contrast, had to suppress emotion when she spoke of "Derrie," and when she spoke to him; she was always being surprised when she saw him, for she'd somehow imagined him much younger, frailer. It was an effort for her to realize that he wasn't four years old any longer, or three — he was six, and husky for his age. She didn't dare hug him as desperately as she wished, a dozen times a day, for the doctor had counseled against this, and Derek himself gave no sign of welcoming it; since coming home from the hospital, he was quiet, subdued, withdrawn. "I'm okay, Mommy," he told her, not meeting her anxious gaze. And, "Mommy, I hated that water anyway."

When Stephen was home, Kate managed quite well with Derek, she believed. But when they were alone together, as they frequently were, she had to resist the almost physical craving to grasp him in her arms and burst into tears. *My baby. My darling. I love you. I would die in your place. Oh forgive me!* For she couldn't shake off the conviction that the boy knew very well how his mother was responsible, however indirectly, for what had happened in the pool.

What had almost happened in the pool.

It was a jarring surprise to Kate to learn, belatedly, that Derek hadn't liked the pool — he'd "hated" it. Naively she'd believed he'd loved it, as the other children did; though, looking back, she recalled how shy he'd been at first of wading out into water that came to his knees, how slow to play in it, splashing like other, younger children, as if in imitation of "having fun." *He'd tried to like the pool, the Community Center, for my sake. That's it.* A wave of shame swept over Kate. She would never tell Stephen this. How she'd been blind to her own son's dislike for the water, for the rowdy companionship of other boys in the water; how selfish she'd been, basking in the privileged atmosphere of the Hudson Ridge Community Center which was easily the equivalent of an affluent suburban country club where she could swim herself if she wished, play tennis, visit with her women friends. Not seeing how her six-year-old son was vulnerable to hurt as an exposed heart.

She told Derek he didn't have to go back — "Not ever, honey."

Stooping to kiss his forehead. [He didn't seem to want to be kissed on, or near, his mouth.]

Recalling with horror that crazed scream. A woman's scream — hers.

Echoing continuously in her ears, when she paused to listen. She wondered if Derek, though unconscious, lying on his back on wet tiles, had heard it. *Yes of course. He heard. He knows.* For that was what death must be: raw, shrieking, confused, violent. Not peaceful at all.

7.

DAYS PASSED. A week. Two weeks. Since what had almost happened hadn't happened.

Derek was pale, quiet, subdued — not "himself" yet. The slightest noise from outdoors or in the house made him jump like a startled animal, his eyelids fluttering, his small body going rigid. His eyes were continually moving, shifting in their sockets. His breathing was quick and shallow, his skin appeared hot. He couldn't settle down to read, to play with one of his games, to watch a video — if Kate entered a room, he soon slipped from it noiselessly. He didn't seem to be hiding in the house yet — where was he? Kate was forever trailing about calling, "Derrie? Sweetie?" in a calm, cheery voice that betrayed none of the anxiety she felt. Fortunately, Stephen knew little of this. Stephen was away most of the day, didn't return home until early evening weekdays, when Derek made an effort, or so it seemed to Kate, to be more normal. Yet even at these times, he didn't like to be touched. As if being touched hurt his sensitive skin. As if being kissed was repugnant. Kate had an idea, a wild and unsubstantiated idea, that Derek feared his parents' mouths — he stared at them, at their mouths, or so it seemed to her, with a look of apprehension. "Honey? What's wrong?" she asked, in her most matter-of-fact voice. Invariably, Derek would shrug and shake his head. He might mumble, "Nothing." Or, irritably, "Mommy, I'm okay."

Kate's heart ached, regarding her son. Whatever had happened to him. Wherever, in those few minutes his heart had stopped, he'd gone. That place he'd gone to, no one else could follow him. She heard again that terrified and terrifying scream — her own. Sometimes, alone in the house, when Derek was in the back yard, Kate jammed a towel against her mouth and screamed, screamed. *No! no! Don't let my son die.* She believed that this initial response, raw, anguished, primitive, was the natural response; behaving "normally" — as if nothing had happened, or almost happened — was unnatural. Of course, she told Stephen nothing of this. He wasn't

one to dwell upon the past in any negative way.

He'd never reproached Kate for not having seen Derek slipping, or being pushed, underwater. He'd never reproached Kate for almost allowing their son to drown in three feet of water.

We'll let Derek lead the way.

Kate understood that this was wisdom. A vigorous, healthy-minded male wisdom. Yet sometimes, as Derek's mother, she couldn't resist feeling such emotion, she was left shaken, bereft. For she'd lost her little boy, after all. Where Derek had been so warm, spontaneous, quivering with energy before the accident, pushing himself into her arms to be hugged and kissed, affectionate as a puppy, now he was stiff, watchful, unsmiling. Had he forgotten how to smile? Was it too much effort to smile? The very posture of his little body communicated *Don't! Don't touch*. He'd lost weight, those extra ounces that had filled out his face, now his face was angular, his jaw more pronounced. And those restless, shifting eyes. "Won't you look at me, Derrie? Is something wrong?" Kate spoke with innocent maternal concern, smiling. If she was frightened she gave no sign. Gently, she grasped Derek's shoulders and squatted before him as she'd done hundreds of times in the past and she saw that he was staring at her now, as if without recognition; his eyes were so dilated, the pupils so starkly black, bleeding out into the iris, she shuddered, thinking *These are an animal's eyes*.

As if reading her thoughts, Derek shrugged out of her grasp. He was breathing quickly, shallowly. He muttered, his lips curling back from his teeth, "I'm okay, I said."

He ran out of the kitchen, and out of the house. One of his hiding places was somewhere beyond the garage, in a tangle of briars and wild shrubs that bled out, unfenced, into a wooded area owned by the township, where there was no path. Kate was left behind in her awkward squat, legs aching, eyes stinging with tears. *But I'm your mother. I'm Mommy. I love you. You love me. You've always loved me. You have to love me!*

8.

After the initial flurry of concerned calls from family, friends, neighbors, the Knights' telephone was silent. Nor did Kate, who'd always been

sociable, have the energy to call women friends. For she would have had to rehearse her words to get them just right. "Yes, what a shock it was! But it's over now, Derek is fine. He'll be back swimming before long, you know how boys are, he'd only just swallowed some water, thank God we live where we do and the ambulance arrived within minutes and there was never any real danger." No, she hadn't the energy.

When Kate asked Derek which of his friends he'd like to play with so that she could make arrangements with their mothers, as she usually had, Derek shrugged and said he didn't want to play with anyone. Kate said, "Not even with Molly? Sam? Susan?" — naming his closest little friends, but Derek impatiently shook his head, no. He turned to walk away from Kate without a backward glance and she would have called after him except she feared rejection.

Except she feared his eyes: so dilated, a glassy impersonal black.

He doesn't recognize me, really. Unless I speak to him, touch him. Force myself upon him as his keeper.

Unbelievable that, only a few weeks ago, that child had so often run laughing into her arms, saying, "I love you, Mommy! I love you, Mommy!" It was as if in fact he'd died, the child-Derrie had died, and this other being had taken his place, a stranger.

But this was nonsense of course. Wasn't it?

Kate dared not speak of such a notion to Stephen, who continued stubbornly to behave as if what had almost happened hadn't happened. That was Stephen's way: he wouldn't have succeeded so definitively, and at so relatively young an age, in his Wall Street brokerage house, if he'd been less decisive, ambivalent. When he returned home from New York in the early evening he wanted peace, he wanted domestic family happiness of the kind to which he, like Kate, had become unknowingly addicted; in his expensive wool-silk suit he'd drop to one knee, arms outstretched, and cry to Derek, "How's my boy? How's my big boy?" Stephen's face crinkled in fatherly ebullience and his voice was loud, like a TV turned up high. From an adjoining room, Kate flinched to see how Derek stiffened at his greeting, where once he'd rushed to throw himself into his Daddy's arms and be lifted into the air like a Ferris wheel. Now Derek looked not at Stephen exactly but in Stephen's direction, head turned away, eyes shifting in their sockets, with the wariness of a cornered

wild animal. Yet Stephen persisted, "How's my Derrie-boy?" The quieter and more reluctant Derek was to be wooed, the more determined was Stephen to behave as if nothing was wrong, seeking out the boy to hug, forcibly if need be, and kiss, and fuss over, like any loving daddy returning home eager to see his little boy. Until one evening, Kate in the kitchen heard what sounded like a scuffle, a child's cry and Stephen's louder, sharper cry, and when she ran to investigate, Derek had fled outside and Stephen, white-faced, incredulous, still squatting, was staring at his right forefinger, which was oozing blood — "He bit me. He bit me to the bone."

9.

"He isn't the same child. He isn't Derrie."

"Don't be absurd. You're becoming morbid-minded. He's still in a state of shock."

"He isn't. You've seen his eyes. He bit you."

"He reacted without thinking. It was a reflex."

"An animal reflex."

Stephen was silent. Of course, he'd seen those eyes. It was all they saw now, in the child's presence, or in his absence: those eyes.

Staring, implacable, unreadable, unhuman eyes. Grotesquely dilated, even in daylight. A horror in such eyes.

I don't know you. I don't love you. You are nothing to me.

10.

That Saturday they took Derek to the Hudson Ridge pediatrician who'd been treating him for years, since babyhood, and the man examined Derek and could find nothing wrong with him, and it did seem, in the examining room, that Derek was more cooperative than usual. Though he shrank from being touched, and resisted looking into the doctor's eyes, and responded only laconically to the man's friendly queries. But his eyes appeared less dilated and his pulse and blood pressure, the doctor said, were normal. The Knights didn't tell him about Stephen's bitten finger, about which Stephen in particular felt shame, nor did they tell him what a difficult time they'd had that morning getting Derek into the car.

Like bringing an anxious dog or cat to the vet, Kate thought.

Stephen's bitten finger, which had given him a good deal of stabbing, worrisome pain, had been treated by another doctor, a stranger, to whom he'd explained the circumstances of the biting with some embarrassment. After a week of antibiotics, Stephen's finger was healing and Stephen refused to discuss it with Kate but, as Derek's daddy, he'd learned not to forcibly embrace his son and smother him with kisses as in the old days.

In private, Derek's pediatrician asked his parents if Derek ever spoke of almost drowning, and they said no, never, and if he dreamt of it, or had nightmares, they weren't aware. Kate said, with a brave smile, "He's changed, as you can see. He seems older. More self-contained. Not a little boy anymore." Stephen said quickly, edging out Kate, as if fearing she might say too much, and too emotionally, "My impression is, he's forgotten. Children don't dwell upon the past. He seems to have outgrown lots of things this summer — games we used to play together, habits of speaking, behaving. Of course, he's growing. He'll soon be seven. He isn't a baby any longer." Stephen spoke with the air of one confirming a principle: Derek's strange coolness toward his parents was to be interpreted as something positive, a sign of health, growth. Kate listened, and made no comment. She suspected that the pediatrician knew more, or suspected more, than he was willing to say; but he wasn't willing to say it, nor were Derek's parents willing to hear it; the visit would end with friendly handshakes, as always. Two days later a nurse called from the pediatrician's office to report cheerfully that Derek's lab tests were all negative, and Kate said brightly, "What good news. Thanks!"

Perhaps that was all it required, then, to be a happy, normal mother: to behave as if one were a happy, normal mother. As if there were no reason to behave otherwise.

11.

Stephen conceded: "When Derek returns to school, he'll be more himself, I'm sure. The summer has just been too long for him."

For the first time in years, the Knights hadn't traveled in August to either Colorado or Maine, to stay with relatives. They'd reasoned that the commotion of travel, the busy, bustling atmosphere of households includ-

ing other children, would have been upsetting for Derek just then. Neither wished to think that Derek's presence, in the midst of other, normal children, would have been deeply distressing to everyone. Neither wished to think that Derek would have resisted their efforts to travel together, as he resisted their efforts to interest him in brief outings and excursions close to home. He preferred to be alone, in his room with the door shut (but not locked: Derek's door had no lock) or, more often, outside. Where he might wander back into the woods, increasingly out of the range of Kate's strained voice. "Derrie? Derrie? Derek?"

In time, Derek drifted home of his own accord, when he wished. Wherever Kate might search for him, he wasn't; where Kate didn't think to look, he'd suddenly appear. Often he came up behind her in the house, noiselessly, and she gave a cry of alarm, turning to see him. He almost smiled, at Mommy's alarm. *Those eyes. Feral eyes. He doesn't know me.* It seemed to Kate that Derek's teeth were more pronounced, his lower jaw longer and more angular, like a dog's snout; he sniffed the air, conspicuously; his very eyeballs had grown tawny, as if with jaundice, and the dilation was often so severe as to comprise the entire iris. The surface of his eyes was slick and glassy, reflecting light. Once, Kate came upon the child in his darkened room on the second floor of the house, crouched by a window, in a kind of trance. Was he staring at the moon? At the night sky churning with shreds of cloud, vaporous tendrils of light? She could hear his quick, panting breath; she saw that his mouth was moving, his jaws spasming as if he were very cold, or very excited. She would have gone to him to touch him, to comfort him, except something warned her *Don't! Don't touch* and she backed away, in silence.

Stephen stayed later and later in the city. Often didn't return home until 9 p.m. when, in theory at least, Derek was in bed, asleep.

Rarely did the three of them eat meals together now. Derek preferred to eat by himself, hungrily, lowering his head to his plate, eating with his fingers. Hamburgers, near-raw at their centers, oozing blood. He drank milk greedily, from the container, hunched inside the opened refrigerator door. Kate thought *It's good, he has his appetite back. It must be good.* How difficult for her, offering this strange child food at arm's length, to recall how once she'd fed him lovingly by hand, spooning baby food into his bird-like, yearning little mouth, how ecstatic she'd felt, nursing him.

Her milk-swollen breasts, her tender nipples, and the infant blindly locating the nipple, sucking with unfocussed eyes — how happy she'd been. How addicted she'd become, without knowing it. *Love, baby-love. What hunger.* Now, remembering, she felt a stab of revulsion. Her breasts that were no longer warmly taut and swollen with milk, ached; the nipples burned as if Derek had bitten and chewed them. Almost, Kate could remember blood trickling from her cracked nipples, tinged with milk....

I can't. Can't let myself. Must stay sane. I am the child's mother.

Like Stephen, Kate had been hoping that when Derek returned to school in September he'd change for the better, but that wasn't the case. Where Derek had loved school, now he seemed to hate it. Where he'd run about excitedly in the morning, eager for Kate to drive him, now he hung back in his room, or disappeared (where? — into the basement, behind the furnace) so that Kate had to hunt him down, calling his name, pleading with him. Where once he'd come home from school chattering with enthusiasm about his teacher, his classmates, his studies, now he was sullen, and refused to talk at all. Suddenly, in second grade, he seemed to have no friends.

Kate was called in to speak with Derek's teacher and with an assistant principal to discuss Derek's poor grades, his poor deportment in class, his boredom, his listlessness, his defiance, his "antisocial" behavior. All this was new, stunningly new to Kate who'd taken for granted, since Montessori school where her Derrie had been one of the sweetest, most well-liked children, that she was a mother blessed by good fortune; a woman late to motherhood, conspicuously older than virtually all of the other mothers, but blessed. Even envied. Now, all that was changed. *Did I want to think it might be my imagination. Mine, and Stephen's. Our haunted-eyed feral son.* In early October there was a "threatening" incident at school, Derek baring his teeth as if to bite another child, and in mid-October there was a "biting" incident, Derek actually biting another boy, sinking his small but surprisingly sharp teeth into the other's hand and drawing blood. For this, Derek was suspended from school for two weeks. (At the school, Kate professed shock, utter shock; her son had never done anything like that before; the other boy had been bullying him, he'd said; the

other boy had in fact threatened *him*; that must be the explanation. Derek sullenly refused to discuss the incident. He didn't at all mind being suspended from school. When Kate and Stephen asked him how he could do such a "terrible, animal" thing, Derek merely shrugged and muttered what sounded like "Hate 'em.") It was advised that the Knights arrange for Derek to see a child therapist immediately, as well as hire a tutor for him; and of course they agreed, of course they would do all they could. They were American parents of a moneyed, educated class, they would do everything humanly possible to help their child, to return him to the normalcy of the species. *He's our only son. We love him so. We don't understand. We are innocent. It's just a phase. A phase of growth. He isn't a baby any longer. What can we do. He drowned, what was human in him drowned. What is human is gone. What was ours is gone. Where?*

Yet: years later when Derek was lost from them, long disappeared from their lives, when they were in fact no longer married, polite strangers to each other, and this politeness tinged with the melancholy of an old, unspeakable grief — Kate would recall with a physical stab of pain how, only a few days after Derek had returned sullenly to school, she'd thrown herself into a flurry of enthusiasm trying to arrange a party for his seventh birthday. That dark, windy November afternoon, between sips of red wine, bravely telephoning the mothers of a dozen of Derek's second-grade classmates to invite them to the party, as in a nightmare of rejection and humiliation, no one wished to come; even those mothers Kate considered her friends had no interest in accepting the invitation. Their responses ranged from sympathetic and embarrassed, "I'm truly sorry, Kate, but Molly is terribly busy now, I'm reluctant to schedule one more thing for her on that Saturday, but thank you," to curt, nearly rude, "Thank you, but I don't think a birthday party for your son is a great idea right now, at least not for Andrew to attend." Yet, grim, smiling, the tart red wine coursing through her tight veins like liquid flame, clamps of panicked pain at her temples, Kate continued to dial numbers. It was hard for her to believe. *It's real, then. But how can it be real, he's only a little boy.*

At that moment tramping through the woods behind the house in a chill windy drizzle he preferred to the warmth of the house. And to her.

12.

The first tutor hadn't worked out, nor the second. Derek had spat at the first, a nineteen-year-old math major from SUNY-Purchase; the second, a friendly middle-aged woman who taught at the community college, he'd bitten on the back of the hand — not hard enough to break the skin, but almost. *Your son is sick. Disturbed. Needs help. You must know.*

Nor had the therapist worked out. Derek had gone berserk when they'd tried to urge him into the car for a second session, he'd guessed where they were taking him though they'd told him with vague smiles that it was nowhere he'd be hurt, only helped, still he'd known instinctively, could sniff the panic lifting from their skins, his darting dilated eyes quick to detect fear in their eyes so he'd pummeled, kicked, raked his sharp broken fingernails across Kate's forearm shouting he hated them, hated them both, as Stephen tried to calm him, "Derek! No! God damn you, Derek! —" but the child wrenched free of his father's awkward hands to escape running in a crouch, like a terrified wild animal, through the back lawn and into the woods where Kate followed him, for Stephen turned away in disgust, Stephen had had enough for that day, it was the child's mother tramping through the unfamiliar woods cupping her hands to her mouth calling, "Derrie? Derrie?" trying not to betray the desperation she felt, telling herself this was a game, this might be interpreted as a game, she had to win back the child's trust, that was it.

But wasn't his mother watching him, a six-year-old. In a swimming pool.

How could it have happened. In a few feet of water. And the child's mother only a few feet away.

Her attention distracted? Imagine!

How can she live with herself, a woman like that. Letting her own child drown.

These cruel gloating voices murmured about her as she stumbled through the wet underbrush, sobbing, her heart beating painfully, in reproach. She was panicked she might become lost in this no-man's-land: the township kept a ten-foot swath for telephone and electrical poles but otherwise the area was overgrown, a virtual jungle. Somewhere beyond a

graveled access road there was the Hudson Ridge reservoir, Kate believed, but in which direction? For forty minutes she searched for the fleeing child calling, "Derrie? Honey — " and then, suddenly, there he was: only about fifteen feet away, watching her. His head was oddly lowered and his eyes fixed upon her, his mouth stretched in a strange twisted smile. Or was it simply a grimace of his lips, the muscles in a spasm. Kate cried, "There you are, honey! Please come home with me, we're so sorry. Your Daddy and — " Kate heard her bright ebullient voice, she forced herself to smile for perhaps this was a game after all, hide-and-seek in the woods, and nothing unusual had happened back at the house. She and Stephen were guilty of poor judgment perhaps, they were well-intentioned but blundering; the thing was to win back the child's trust. Smiling Kate reached out happily for Derek's hand but he stood unmoving staring at her with those dark-dilated eyes and the warning passed through her mind as if in the impersonal voice of another *Don't! Don't touch! He will attack* and so she knew not to force his hand, but simply to guide him back home, he was surprisingly tractable, though sullen, unresponsive. She was exhausted by this time though as they made their way back to the house Kate chattered nervously, an American-mom voice she'd acquired from TV, unnatural to her, yet a revelation, offered to Derek so that he might believe, if he wished to believe, that, from Mommy's side, nothing had changed — "Sweetie, you know I love you. You know." It was a secret what he knew, of course. The inanity and futility of her words swept over her. Yet she refused to surrender to silence, for she was the child's mother, and she did love him, or what remained of him, or what she could recall of him, and in the kitchen that surprised, so cheerily lit, clean shining surfaces as in a TV advertisement, she gave the boy his supper, setting a plate before him at the formica-topped table, standing at a little distance to watch in appalled fascination. As he ate. She realized that he'd come home with her, he'd allowed her to find him, because he was hungry; because, in the wild, he hadn't yet found the food he required.

13.

That night, or another. Lying awake. Separate from each other. Not touching.

Their bodies now shrank from touch. The accidental brush of the other's heated skin — almost, this was repugnant. Indecent.

For of their touch years before, their kisses, their embraces — what had come into the world? What creature born of their heedless yearning? They could not bear to think.

It was a night in mid-winter, no it was a night in early March — the house quaking with wind and a smell of rain and winter-rotted leaves. It was not a night Kate could identify for she'd endured similar nights so many times, nights of fitful sleep, heart-pounding sleep and hours of wakefulness protruding like bleached, misshapen boulders out of eddying dark water, and now Stephen was nudging her asking if she heard? — the stealthy sound of footsteps in the hall outside their room, Derek was prowling by night, slipping away as he'd been forbidden yet to barricade him in his room, lock the door with a padlock, nail the windows shut, would be to admit he had to be penned in, a captive animal, so Stephen was nudging her shoulder as if to wake her in the pretense he didn't know she was already awake, as he'd been, "Do you hear, Kate? It's him." As if it could be anyone else.

And Kate whose solace was now in sleep, groggy hours of day-sleep when she was alone in the house, fitful patches of night-sleep, where the feral eyes were strangely absent and it was the lost baby — Derrie, the plump-cheeked little boy gazing at her with eyes of love, rose immediately with her husband, yes she would go with him, to follow Derek and bring him back, as she'd done herself, not once but a number of times, they fumbled with their clothes and on the stairs vertigo lifted from the darkness below but Kate refused to give in, Kate was going to be brave, strong, stubborn, she was the child's mother, she must take responsibility and would take responsibility, and at the back door as they hurried they saw a small lithe fleeing figure dart from the shadow of the house toward the woods — "There he is!" It was a night of high, wind-blown shreds of cloud passing the moon's bulbous face, a pocked lewd face it seemed, a winking face, and no stars surrounding it, oddly, and there Derek ran in a crouch like a wild animal familiar with the terrain and they ran in his wake already breathless, panting, for they were in their forties, middle-aged and too old for parenthood, this was their punishment for daring to bring life into the world, raw unheeded life not theirs to protect. They

cried, "Derek! Derek — " but the March wind blew away their cries in mockery. The fat-faced moon leered down at them in mockery. In the marshy woods smelling of rot, in the sink-holes that wetted their feet within seconds, through underbrush tearing at their clothes, pricking their skins, through briars, thorns, branches whipping against their faces, they stumbled a half-mile, or was it a mile, to the muddy graveled access road, across this road sighting Derek, or a figure they believed to be Derek, scuttling crouched close to the ground, sharp eyes penetrating the darkness as theirs could not, except as the sky opened to marmoreal brightness as the moon glared through webs of broken cloud and they were panting, shivering, desperate to follow the fleeing child, now losing him, now sighting him, and at last they emerged in a grassy space seeing him a distance ahead, Kate recognized with difficulty the eastern edge of the reservoir, a body of water commonly seen only from the road, and only from her car as she drove to and from the village — but now she and Stephen found themselves there, at what hour of the night they couldn't know, long past midnight, yet hours from dawn, they saw the water's surface ripple with wind like the skin of a nervous animal and in it filmy, rushing puzzle-pieces of sky and the winking moon, and on the farther side amid tall whipping cattails — Derek wasn't alone.

There were others with him. Small lithe figures like his, and several taller figures. Who these were, male, female, what their faces, what their eyes, they could not see, were fearful of seeing, they heard low murmurous voices unless it was the wind, they heard — was it laughter? They dared not venture forward. They shrank into the shadows, clutching hands, in terror of being seen.





A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

IMAGINING OTHER MINDS

FOR THE most talky creature on the planet, we're not that versatile.

Our attempts to communicate with other species on Earth have not been strikingly successful.

We have developed a dictionary of several hundred words for communicating with bright chimpanzees and apes. Very limited discourse flows between us and the Cetaceans, principally dolphins, though whale songs are intriguingly complex; more research in these directions would be illuminating.

But these are minds evolved in our own biosphere. Surely contemplating a message that utterly different minds could fathom sets the outer limit of any strategy for communicating across great stretches of time.

Yet that is what a team of Jon Lomberg, astronomer Carolyn

Porco, and I tried to design for NASA's *Cassini* spacecraft, to be sent in November 1997 to Saturn. This is the second of three columns concerning how we fashioned the message.

Even if we look for mathematical universals, how truly general are they? Here conversations Lomberg, Porco, and I had with noted theoretical psychologist Louis Narens proved unsettling. Narens is a professor at my own university, the University of California at Irvine, and his ideas are mind-stretching even for science fictional people.

Semiotics is the study of non-verbal communication, and mathematics is fundamentally nonverbal, though ours (and presumably others') does have a notation. Scientists usually think of mathematics as a set of immutable truths,

emerging from the world with the heft and solidity of Platonic ideals.

Narens dispelled these comfortable notions. Alien arithmetic could be non-numerical, he said — that is, purely comparative rather than quantitative. Such beings would think solely in terms of whether A was bigger than B, without bothering to break A and B into countable fragments.

How could this arise? Suppose their surroundings had few solid objects or stable structures — say, they are jelly creatures awash in a thick Titanian ethane sea of the far future. Indeed, if they were large creatures requiring a lot of ocean to support their grazing on lesser beasts, they might seldom even meet each other. Seeingsmallerfish as mere uncountable swarms — but knowing intuitively which knot of delicious stuff is bigger than the others — they might never evolve the notion of large numbers at all.

This idea isn't crazy even for humans. The artificial intelligence researcher Marvin Minsky told me of a patient he had once seen who could count only up to three. She could not envision six as anything other than two threes.

For these beings, geometry would be largely topological, reflecting their concern with overall

sensed structure rather than with size, shape, or measurement, à la Euclid. Such sea beasts would lack combustion and crystallography, but would begin their science with a deep intuition of fluid mechanics, as obvious as gravity is to us.

Of course, these creatures might never build any technology, and so not find our diamond markers we proposed to send into the sludge of Titan, much less find it orbiting Saturn. Even land-based creatures might not share our assumptions about what's obvious. Our concepts are unsuited to scales of size far removed from those of our everyday experience.

What would Aristotle have thought of issues in quantum electrodynamics? He would have held no views, because the subject lies beyond his conceptual grasp. His natural world didn't have quanta or atoms or light waves in it. In that very limited conceptual sense, Aristotle was alien.

Our hope for the message was that at least (and perhaps only) in the cool corridors of mathematics could there be genuinely translatable ideas. Marvin Minsky takes this view, believing that any evolved creature — maybe even intelligent whorls of magnetic field, or plasma beings doing their crimson mad

dances in the hearts of stars — would have to dream up certain ideas, or else make no progress in surviving, in mathematics, or in anything else. He labels these ideas Objects, Causes, and Goals.

Are these fundamental notions that any alien must confront and use? We cast a pale shadow of doubt over Objects, since these depend upon one's perceiving apparatus; a snake would respond to images in the infrared while we would not, for example. Even causality isn't a crystal-clear notion in our own science, particularly in quantum mechanics.

Why then should Objects, Causes, and Goals emerge in some other-worldly biosphere? Minsky holds that the ideas of arithmetic and of causal reasoning will emerge eventually because every biosphere is limited. Some inevitable scarcity will occur. Limited means force adoption of realizable Goals, and reward those who Caused them to come to pass, acting upon Objects.

Organisms that can conceptually organize the external world to perceive Minsky's root ideas will get more from their efforts. Such Darwinian selection will affect all their later biases. Minsky has framed technical arguments showing that these notions must turn up

in any efficient (and, presumably, intelligent) computer, and the ideas may generalize to aliens. Of course, there is a big conceptual leap here. Computational ideas may not prove adequate for biological organisms, they certainly weren't obvious even to us a mere century ago.

Most scientists who have thought about communication with aliens work within the assumptions of SETI — with mathematics as the fulcrum of communication. Hans Freudenthal's LINCOS is a computer language designed to isolate the deepest ideas in logic itself and to build a language around it. It uses binary symbols typed out in lines (a choice we also made for our message). LINCOS stands ready the moment we run into something green, slimy, and repulsive, and yet with that restless urge to write — or read.

Math is central to the whole issue of communication because it allows us to describe "things" accurately and even beautifully without even knowing what they are.

Richard Feynman once said, to the horror of some, that "the glory of mathematics is that we do not have to say *what we are talking about*" (emphasis his).

Feynman meant that the "stuff" that communicates fields,

for example, will work whether we call it wave or particle or thingamabob. We need not have such cozy pictures at all, as long as we write down the right equations. As David Politzer of Caltech once remarked, "English is just what we use to fill in between the equations."

We felt this might help as we sought what Louis Narens termed "cognitive universals." While it is impossible to avoid biases because we are humans, and immersed in our cultures, we also had to avoid regarding some ideas as obvious simply because we could not imagine how they could not be. As Minsky sardonically remarked, "Artificial realms like mathematics and theology are built from the start to be devoid of interesting inconsistency." The real world could summon forth fantastic choices.

Narens had made a vital point: while aliens should have concepts like arithmetic, they need not have more than rules for how to add, subtract, and multiply particular numbers. We reason inductively, as in the title of a George Gamow book, *One, Two, Three...Infinity*. We humans generalize simple, small numbers to arbitrarily large ones, and invent relations between them as well.

This gives us a fascination with primes, for example, and how to calculate large ones, as part of an infinite ensemble. To us, numbers are Platonic objects, existing as ideals, literally innumerable in extent. Aliens may not need such a habit of mind.

The abilities necessary for generalizing based on induction seem to come from the linguistic abilities of creatures on Earth, particularly us. Hunters in the animal kingdom have counting ability, as would come naturally from a sharp sense of how to cut an ailing member from a herd — that is, abstracting an integer from an unbroken flow. But evolutionary pressure for more efficient processing need not necessarily lead to inductive generalizations like the totality of natural numbers. Few people, after all, need to use numbers larger than a hundred or so except in financial matters.

Instead of concentrating upon general facets of integers, for example, one could imagine minds which "see" the flux of a physical quantity. Indeed, for some important features of our world, we, too, perceive intuitively the flow of things, not the quantity itself. We speak of a room being chilly, but we do not measure its temperature;

instead, we sense the rate that heat flows out of us, a derivative of temperature. When we think of metal being colder than wood, for example, we are actually discerning our different heat losses through them. Evolution has geared us warm-bloods to be leery of losing energy.

Similarly, our vision registers the logarithm of light intensity, not the intensity itself; this is why we can see over such a wide range of brightness, from noonday glare to starlight.

Viewing our problems so broadly was invigorating but daunting. Imagining weirdly different readers of our diamond disk was entertaining, but it gave us too much latitude. How could we ever decide on specifics?

In the end we fell back upon the aesthetics argued for earlier by Lomborg. Still, we had to remember our Earthly audience, since the message would receive some NASA publicity; a bizarre message might play poorly in Peoria. Narens agreed, remarking that "bad presentation of the rationale for such messages, their design, or their content, could easily generate ridicule — not only for the particular message but also for creation of such messages in general. A good job could add an-

other dimension of adventure to the mission."

To impart numbers we decided to use binary notation, following LINCOS. This was an almost inevitable choice, since digital portrayal emerges naturally, mandated by the fact that any number enjoys a unique representation only in base 2. The number of days in Earth's year is

$$365 = 2^8 + 2^6 + 2^5 + 2^3 + 2^2 + 2^0$$

Only in base 2 is this designation, 101101101, unique. Thus communication between any entities who fathomed mathematics, and understood integers, could well be forced to the common tongue of binary notation.

Why is binary so basic? Because plus/minus, greater or lesser, up/down are simple distinctions useful in any environment. Life just about anywhere would have to make such contrasts.

We could cement this by expressing the Golden Section, $1/2(1+5^{1/2})$, in binary. But how to decide where to cut off the infinite fraction, which does not repeat? This issue we never settled.

We decided to employ a mass and length standard related to the spacecraft, just like the *Voyager*

"dictionary" prepared by Frank Drake and Lomborg. Depiction and encoding would follow *Voyager* methods. Since the diamond might well survive alone long after the rest of the spacecraft disintegrated, its diameter of 28 mm was the obvious unit length, which we termed "1u." Saturn's mass we gave in units of the disk mass, 4.32 grams, so the number in binary stands for 1.3×10^{29} . To make the connection we placed it beside a picture of Saturn itself.

What else was truly basic? As a physicist I thought of unit systems, but other sciences have other fundamentals. Mark Martin, an Occidental College biologist, suggested including a compact representation of our biosphere in a two-dimensional sketch. Accompanying the planned picture of humans, it could show the major kingdoms of life, with size markers beside the simple line drawings to give their true scale. This would presume aliens could decode such a 2D picture; many animals, after all, cannot.

I then thought of including a truly dense carrier of information, a strand of DNA. This basic "unit" of biology would adroitly send much biological knowledge, independent of language, by giving our readers the thing itself, not a representation.

Of course, such a DNA record is not useful without the record "player": specifications of intricate conditions in the womb, etc. But Lomborg quickly pointed out that to send any biological sample into space, however tiny, would violate the Planetary Protection Protocol, a set of rules to stop worlds being contaminated. Never mind that the DNA could be sealed inside the diamond disk; jumping through bureaucratic hoops would take time and effort we did not have.

He even raised a moral issue: what if someone in the far future "resurrected" the being from its DNA? Should we "condemn" a genetic descendant to whatever world it would face? This struck me as a bizarre argument, but it had the smell of *Voyager's* reception, too: someone would undoubtedly raise this, getting plenty of splashy coverage. (*NASA Sends Elvis Sperm to Saturn*, Lomborg suggested all too plausibly.)

Given these troubles, we rejected any biological sample.

But what of less obvious standards? Time has no obvious units appropriate to billion-year scales; atomic frequencies are in the billionth of a second. Here we decided to rely on a crucial assumption: that whoever found the message

would know a bit of astronomy, even if they lived in Titan's soupy atmosphere.

Marking Time

We assumed that if in some far-distant future other beings find the Cassini/Huygens Diamond Medalion, they will wonder who made it, and when, and what it has to tell them. Surely beings who reach orbit about Saturn should have some trait resembling what we call curiosity.

To answer such questions we designed several two-dimensional pictures. Could we trust that our future audience could comprehend flat, two-dimensional images? Again, invoking evolution, we gambled that intelligence would arise in beings who had followed strategies based on clever gathering, if not hunting. Such minds would need vision that could distinguish distance.

Of course, we are prejudiced in favor of the visible spectrum. Bats, whales, and dolphins see with acoustic waves. We quickly decided to give up any hope of communicating with such creatures, unless they could sense the patterns we would etch into the diamond by reflected sound waves. This seemed quite

unlikely, given the tiny writing we were forced to use. Acoustic waves of that size are very high frequency.

Further, quite plausibly they would know that objects that in a flat projection are above others would most likely be further away, just as in a landscape painting the horizon is higher than nearby rocks. Vision would have to deal with troubles such as, say, trees that begin at the ground and cross the horizon. This need not require binocular vision, but we did demand some such ordering principle of our audience. Without it, our choices were simply too broad, and might elude our Earthly audience as well.

Photographs of the Earth should show where the message came from, and a stereo photograph of humans will show them who made the diamond. As well, the stereo photo could help show how we turn two-dimensional representations into three-dimensional ones.

But how to show *when* the diamond was created? A calendar based on our present reckoning would mean nothing.

Previous deep time messages used astronomical objects as time markers. In the *Voyager* Interstellar Record, Frank Drake suggested including a photograph of the Andromeda Galaxy, our own Milky

Way Galaxy's nearest large neighbor. Andromeda is visible to our naked eyes, and should be obvious from anywhere in the Milky Way. Galaxies rotate in about half a billion years, and several dwarf galaxies orbiting Andromeda move perceptibly in a million years. Those who find the *Voyager* Record in interstellar space millions of years from now can compare how Andromeda looks then with our photograph. If they are good astronomers, they can then estimate *Voyager's* age to within perhaps a million years.

In a similar sense, photographs of the Earth also provide a kind of calendar, since continental drift is perceptible on time scales of a few million years. Continent profiles and positions on the future Earth, compared with an Earth map that was part of the message, could lead an astute alien to a rough age, assuming they understand continental drift and could see Earth at all. Present Titan residents could not make out the inner planets in visible light through their thick atmosphere. But over many hundreds of millions of years the continents will alter unrecognizably, and the diamond's readers may also not have good close-up images of our planet.

This strategy was used already,

on a small plaque attached to the LEGEOS satellite. Carl Sagan designed a picture of our continents as they looked several hundred million years ago, their present map, and a projection of how we think they will appear in eight million years, the rough lifetime of the satellite.

With this in mind, Lomberg proposed using four different types of astronomical objects which evolve at different rates, "clocks" covering different time scales. Whenever the diamond is found and studied, one of the photographs will display changes allowing a rough dating.

Saturn

Anyone who finds the diamond in orbit around Saturn or on Titan will know the looming presence of the nearest planet. Saturn's beautiful ring system can be our clock. Saturn's tidal pull prevents these disks of ice particles from collapsing into a moon. The rings are extremely complex, like giant phonograph records, with thousands of ringlets separated by small gaps. There are large gaps as well, the most visible from Earth being the Cassini Division. The French/Italian astronomer Giovanni Domenico

Cassini discovered the gap in 1675, correctly believing the rings to be made of particles, though this view took a century and a half to find acceptance.

At the Cassini Division, particles orbit Saturn in half the period of the innermost moon, Mimas. Mimas exerts a cumulative tidal pull on these, tugging them out of the gap region. The division's exact position then depends on Mimas's orbit, which itself slowly changes over hundreds of millennia, due to the tidal forces of Saturn's other moons. As Mimas moves, so moves the Cassini Division.

If those who find the diamond know this, careful comparison of the division's precise position as they see it with the diamond's picture will serve to date the diamond. This calendar should be useful over periods of millions of years. The limitations of the calendar lie in our own knowledge, for we have no sure idea of how long Saturn's rings will last; they may be a passing phenomenon, on astronomical scales.

The Big Dipper

Constellations are chance cliques of stars, unassociated except for being grouped in our night

sky. Each star moves through the galaxy in its idiosyncratic orbit, so the accidental association into, say, the Big Dipper will disperse as the stars move on in different directions at different speeds. Our sun moves, too, and the sum of all these motions ultimately will take millennia to alter a constellation in our sky. Constellations look the same from Saturn as from Earth, because the stars are so far away. Our famous and easily recognized Big Dipper will slowly alter over tens of millennia. Its bowl will become shallower as the four stars forming it disperse on their own orbits. Within 60,000 years distortion will make it unrecognizable. The Waste Interment Pilot Project panel had proposed this same time marker, developed by Drake and Lomberg.

From the Big Dipper's photo on the medallion, its discoverers should recognize it but also notice its altered shape. If they understand astronomy, they could compare the Dipper as they see it with our image. Within roughly a 20,000 to 50,000 year span this will give them time since it was sent from Earth.

Galaxy M74

Galaxies are bee-swarms of stars. Many of them resemble our

spiral-shaped disk. Such spiral arms draw the eye, for they trace bright star-births that flare in the wake of compression waves. When we see the gaudy, beautiful arms that seem to wrap around the central hub, we are witnessing where dark clouds once collapsed, driven by the characteristic sound-like waves that act upon the galaxy's "gas" of stars and dust. In a few million more years, the wave will have advanced a bit, illuminating a different sector.

Galaxy M74 is a spiral that will change similarly to our own. Again, discoverers of the diamond disk can use its M74 photograph as a calendar by comparing the spiral's appearance then and now, discernible over periods of ten million years.

The diamond marker's disk may suggest studying the depicted spiral disk, but we intended a more basic, elegant subtlety: the Golden Section. To further call this relation forth, we planned to include in the foreground of the photograph of humans, the Portrait of Humanity, a chambered nautilus sea shell, exhibiting the same spiral. We felt that patterns repeated elsewhere on the disk would call attention to themselves.

Spirals appear in sea shells and galaxies alike, calling forth our appreciation of beauty. Among the

many spiral galaxies we chose M74 as one of the most beautiful to human eyes. We cannot know if extra-terrestrials will share our same sense of the sublime, but we can suggest our own.

As a time marker other galaxies could work better, such as M51, which has a small satellite galaxy orbiting it. The satellite might be easier to track than the spiral arms, its position serving as a clock. On the other hand, M51's spiral arms do not give as close a fix on the Golden Section as M74. This is because galactic arms have thick-nesses, so fitting them to an exact line introduces ambiguity. In the end, M74's closeness to the ratio won out over the satellite, a judgment call.

The Hercules Cluster of Galaxies

Galaxies cluster, our own Milky Way Galaxy and neighbor Andromeda are the largest members of a small throng of about twenty galaxies, mostly dwarfs, known as the Local Group. Many clusters of galaxies are much larger, with hundreds or thousands of members. The diamond medallion's photograph shows a section of a large, obvious, nearby swarm, the

Hercules Cluster, where many galaxies orbit in a grand gavotte precisely played by gravity. Two such galaxies are colliding. As they separate, they will draw streams of stars out in long tails, easily seen by astronomers with telescopes no more advanced than ours of fifty years ago.

Their slow dance takes the galaxies tens, hundreds, or even thousands of millions of years to alter their positions relative to each other. The Hercules Cluster therefore serves as the longest of our time markers, giving recipients of the Cassini/Huygens medallion a clock ticking off billions of years.

On such time scales, mere mortal beings seem like nothing.

Yet such beings sent *Cassini*, and presumably other mortals would want to know a lot about their own kind. As with *Voyager*, we wished to send a talisman for all of us. How could we make it striking, visual—that is, how could we send a snapshot of ourselves?

The next column concludes our work on devising a message that could speak for us to whomever finds the *Cassini* spacecraft near Saturn, many centuries from now.

Comments and objections to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717. e-mail: gbenford@uci.edu



J. Patrick Jensen recently moved with his wife and young children from rain-soaked northern California to dryer land in San Diego. He is twenty-seven years old and this is his first sale. It shows the influence of another young writer from California, Ray Bradbury. We think you'll find this subtle fantasy memorable.

The Kaleidoscope

By J. Patrick Jensen

IT WAS A DELICATE THING in Daniel's grasp, as though a single rash gesture might crush it to bits of black crepe. As he rolled the kaleidoscope be-

tween his frigid hands, admiring its smooth texture, it flashed brilliant celestial light from its obsidian shell. He stood, mesmerized, galoshes-deep in the snow.

When he had seen it in the toy shop, tucked inconspicuously among stuffed animals, he'd grabbed it without looking inside and brought it to the stout woman behind the counter. Days earlier his father had said with a sad, frail smile, "Here's ten dollars. Get anything you want. We're doing things a little different this Christmas."

Daniel searched his coat pockets for three dollars. Out came a crumpled dollar and some nickels, though more change jingled in his right pocket. He remembered the hole in this particular pocket where change always fell into another dimension between the lining and outer material: a magician's secret compartment.

He stood shaking out coins while the saleswoman marshaled toy

soldiers on a wooden shelf trimmed with holly. One last coin remained, and when Daniel freed it and laid it out with the rest of his money, he stared astonished at his balance.

Precisely three dollars.

As though he was destined to have the kaleidoscope.

Now outside the toy shop, he raised the cylinder and looked inside.

He gasped, then stood for a long, long time, motionless in the white winter snow. His head tilted back, two tears slid down his face and pooled in each ear. After a while he placed it carefully in his trousers pocket and walked home.

Lying in bed that night, he used a flashlight to illuminate the kaleidoscope's interior. Across the room his older brother Aaron tossed violently in bed to stress a point. Before their mother died such a thing as a flashlight would not keep Aaron awake, but now it irritated him the way everything did these days.

"For crying out loud, put that thing out!" his brother barked into the wall.

He made to position the light beneath his pillow.

Aaron shot up in bed and hissed: "What did I say — !?"

Daniel clicked off the light.

One clear, cold afternoon Daniel arrived home to find the house unnaturally still.

"Dad?" he called, setting his schoolbooks upon the kitchen table. He walked through the living room, hearing only dying embers in the fireplace and the melancholy tick-tock of the grandfather clock. He half expected to see Dad in his chair, smiling at the newspaper funnies. When Mom was alive his father laughed out loud. Daniel turned the corner where their Christmas tree had stood in years past and headed upstairs.

Dad was sitting on Daniel's bed and, while making it up after his son forgot to that morning, had apparently discovered the kaleidoscope. He wondered how long his father had sat there staring frozen into the iridescent tube. Dad reluctantly pulled the kaleidoscope away and Daniel noticed a reddened imprint around his eye, something he normally would

have found comical. Dad gazed trancelike at him, his eyes bloodshot, as though tears had flowed but long ago dried.

Finally Dad handed him the toy and said, "Keep it in a safe place, son."

Brittle sunlight played gently through the frost-speckled window, imbuing the bedroom in kaleidoscopic patterns. Daniel opened his eyes a fraction, watching water swim in his vision: the tearful remnants of sorrowful dreams. He fully opened his eyes and the phantoms dissipated to sparkling snowflakes like the ones finished falling outside.

He sat up and looked upon Aaron's vacant bed. His brother rose early, rain or shine, sometimes a full hour before he himself awoke. Seeing a clear coast, he slid his hand beneath the pillow...

...and found empty space.

Daniel sprang to his knees — instantly awake — and ripped his pillow from the mattress. Bare. The world spun. He jumped to the floor and frantically wrestled his blankets off the bed, shaking out the sheets, spreading each blanket flat on the floor. He turned his pillowcase out. He shone his flashlight under the boxspring. Breathless, he yanked his bed to the center of the room. Where was it? Where was it?

Aaron strolled into the room, redfaced from exposure, his clothes spattered with snow. Daniel turned on him, panicked, verging on tears and black rage. "*What did you do with it?*" he screamed.

"Huh?" replied Aaron.

"The kaleidoscope! What have you done with the kaleidoscope?"

"Oh, that." Aaron poked around in his pockets, shook his head.

"Sorry, sport. I musta lost it."

"You *what?*" Daniel trembled furiously.

"It looked kinda neat, I dunno. I put it in my jacket when I went out sledding. I was gonna stop and look in it. Guess I forgot."

Daniel felt the world crumbling around him.

"Hey," said Aaron, becoming quarrelsome again, "why are you so hung up on a stupid toy anyhow?"

Daniel yelled and leaped on him, thrashing wildly. He crushed him to the floor, snarling like a rabid animal, raking his nails into exposed flesh. Aaron shrieked in pained surprise.

Dad burst into the room, and after separating the boys, heard the story

through their labored breath. Dad looked as though a giant skyscraper had collapsed in him. Silently he sat down, right in the midst of all the clutter, right down on the floor he plopped, and put his face in his hands. Aaron, bewildered and outright frightened by this display, ran out of the room.

Daniel looked out the window as his brother, whom he truly did not hate now, bounded away from the house, leaving ragged holes in the pristine snow.

Dinner was mournfully quiet that evening. Dad had not punished Aaron — hadn't talked about the kaleidoscope at all — and, in fact, hugged him along with Daniel as both boys went up to bed. Dad then opened the trash container and emptied three half-full plates slowly.

No sleep claimed Daniel as he lay on his side. He closed his wet eyes halfway in the gloom, but what he saw could not touch the fragile beauty and magic of his lost kaleidoscope.

During the night Aaron cried out in his sleep. Daniel rolled over to see him sitting and sobbing in darkness. When Dad came in and sat down, Aaron threw his arms around him. Daniel pretended to sleep as he watched them.

"Ssshhh," whispered Dad. "It's okay now."

Aaron's voice, muffled against his father's chest, drifted across the room.

"Dad, I had a dream about Mom."

Daniel's heart caught in his chest, for Aaron had barely mentioned their mother since cancer had taken her from them all.

"In the dream, I saw her pretty face. Oh, I wish I could see her again!"

Daniel swallowed hard, trying not to make a sound as Dad embraced Aaron, who never got the chance to look inside the kaleidoscope.



Laurel Winter's last appearance here was with "Tomorrow Tea" in our December issue. She recently won the Asimov's Reader's Poll with her poem "why goldfish shouldn't use power tools." She lives in Rochester, Minnesota, and volunteers at the elementary school her twins attend...which probably explains where she got the impetus for this story about a big kid.

Fighting Gravity

By Laurel Winter

STUCK IN THE PRINCIPAL'S office for not listening again. He had to be the only kid who regularly got sent there for not doing anything. No fist fights — although his fists were big as some kids' faces. He'd tried it once, in kindergarten, and his parents said never again fit in fit in you must fit in and then they gave him the medicine that fogged him up and made it easy to forget fists the size of faces.

Made it easy to travel off on a teacher's voice and end up somewhere above cloud level.

Secretary sighed when she saw Flynn. Didn't bother to ask what he was doing there. "Another one of those days, huh?"

Flynn gave the secretary a minuscule nod that tightened the big muscles at the back of his neck. He settled himself down on a bench in the corner and opened his math book. The principal didn't usually bother to talk to him anymore; there was an unspoken agreement that he could use the outer office as an unofficial study hall whenever one of the seventh-grade teachers got sick of his daydreaming.

So he was in the office when the girl came in.

She had been fighting. One fist had a smudge of blood — not hers — on it. The teacher who escorted her in, one hand on the girl's shoulder, looked wary, uneasy, glad to shed duty once they were physically inside the office.

"This is Jillie Myers," the teacher said, dropping back a step. "She hit another student in the nose. I have to get back to my class."

The principal was on the phone or something in the back office, so Flynn and the secretary and the girl were alone in the room for a while.

She was looking at the secretary sullenly, so she didn't see Flynn right away. Her wide neck rooted her head firmly on huge shoulders. She was proportioned differently from the other students he saw continually, the tall, slender girls and boys that made him despise his own form. Flynn's stomach clutched up and he had a hard time breathing. He fumbled the inhaler out of his pocket and jammed it in his mouth.

The girl turned toward him. Her eyes widened above heavy cheeks. Before she could talk, though, the principal opened the office door and beckoned her in.

The secretary looked from Flynn to the office. "She looks like — she's going to be in trouble," she finished lamely. Then she began typing, fast and ragged, on her word processor.

Flynn put his inhaler back and clenched his fists. They were about the same size as the girl's fists, maybe a little larger, but they were pale and pudgy and lacked the bloody smudge. He could feel the muscles in his neck and shoulders going taut. She looked like him. That ugly beast of a person could have been his sister. Aside from his parents, he had never seen anyone, in person or in pictures, who resembled him. Her physical reality suddenly made his own body undeniable. He was never going to "grow out of it."

"I have to go home," he said, dropping his book on the bench.

The secretary ceased her typing frenzy. "Are you feeling sick, Flynn? Would you like to go to the nurse's office?"

Flynn knew that the other student, the one whose bloody nose had stained the girl's hand, would be there, snuffling into a cloth. He clenched his fists again. "No! I'm going home." The adrenaline in his system cut through the fog.

"I'll call your — " the secretary was saying as Flynn pushed out of the office and ran toward the main doors.

He never ran anymore, he realized. Years ago, kids had made fun of him, the way his body swung from side to side as he transferred his bulk from one muscular leg to another. He'd forgotten how easy it was, how fast he could run for a person of his size, how much he enjoyed it. Now he tried to forget the teasing, the image they'd shoved into his mind of a bear's lumbering gait.

When he was off the school grounds, he slowed to a walk, puffing slightly, patting his pocket to make sure his inhaler was still there, just in case. Even though it was easy, he was still out of practice, and his muscles and lungs wouldn't let him forget that.

Who was she? The question hit him again and again. Why hadn't he seen her before?

It didn't take him long to reach home. Just long enough for the questions to drive him crazy and the answers he made up to get very strange. She was there to haunt him. She was an ogre girl from a fairy tale. She was the twin sister, stolen from the hospital at birth, that his parents had never told him about.

That answer at least explained the sense of loss that was with him continually.

His parents were home, as he knew they would be, since they both worked there. He went in the house, questions bubbling inside him. His mother came up the stairs. Her eyes were narrow above her cheeks, like Flynn's own, like the girl's had been before surprise had widened them. "What are you doing home from school? The secretary called. You're not supposed to just leave."

"I just — I wanted...." Flynn's questions died. He had been stupid. "I guess I don't feel well," he finished quietly.

"You can go to bed," his mother said, already turning to go back to work. "That might help."

It wouldn't, Flynn knew. He climbed the stairs to his bedroom and lay down, fully dressed, staring at the ceiling. With one hand, he touched his broad face, his neck, the thick planes of his chest and stomach, his thighs, still quivering from the run. That had been the one good thing about this confusion — rediscovering running. He pinched the

layer of fat on his leg and imagined it melting away, leaving only muscle.

He pinched himself harder. Some daydream. Even if he did lose the fat, one of his legs would still be twice the size of a normal boy's.

And if he couldn't even ask his parents questions, he surely wouldn't be able to just go up and talk to some strange beast of a girl.

HE DIDN'T HAVE TO. She found *him* the next day, fogging through the hallway. His parents had given him extra medicine that morning, just a precaution they said it will help you feel better maybe we do need to increase your dosage now that you're getting older and bigger.

His second period teacher sent him to the principal. He took his book and started for the office, following a wall. Everything moved slower on the medicine, that was why mornings were worse, why his first and second period teachers were most apt to send him away. By seventh period, which was art this year, he felt mostly normal. The art teacher even liked him, encouraged the strange, wild paintings he came up with.

But it was still just second period when she found him. She was coming out of the library with a stack of books held easily in one arm. "Hey," she said. "Stop."

Flynn stopped. The medicine made him likely to do what he was told — if he heard it in the first place. "Who are you?" he asked.

She looked at him, then scanned the hallway with a smooth, slow twist of her neck, not like the quick, furtive gestures of his classmates. "I've gotta talk to you." She set the books down in the hall. "Come on."

Flynn followed, still carrying his Minnesota history book. When they got near the office, he started drifting toward it, remembering his original destination. "No," she hissed. "What are you — an idiot?"

The question made Flynn mad, woke him up a little.

They were just around the corner from the office, as close as they could get and still be out of sight. The girl stuck her big face close to Flynn's. "I know you don't know me, but I have to talk to you. I promise it's important."

He nodded slightly. Even fogged up, he remembered his questions from the day before.

"I don't know this school very well yet," she said. "Is there someplace nobody goes?"

Flynn fought the fog. "Uh, well, I — " his voice trailed off.

"Did they drug you up?"

The way she said *they* pierced Flynn's confusion. Angry. Bitter. A word with fists behind it. "Medicine," he said. "My parents — "

He could almost see her bite back her next words. After a silence, she said, "We do have to talk. Let's get out of here." That slow scan of the hallway. Middle of the period, no one around. She took his book and leaned it against the wall. Then she peered around the corner.

Flynn's heart thrummed fast.

"Let's crawl past the office," she said. "Then we can make a run for it."

Running. That sounded good. Maybe he could run out of the fog. Would she run like he did, like a bear? "Okay," he said, dropping to his knees.

They crawled into the open space, the office — windows starting at waist-height — to the left, the main entrance directly ahead. Flynn just kept moving, right arm and left leg, left arm and right. You never forget how to crawl, he thought, even though you quit when you're so little. Like you never forget how to run, even if they tease you out of it.

His muscles got tighter and tighter as they crossed toward the doors to outside. As soon as they stood up to go through the door, the secretary might see them. Or when they were outside, running.

Jillie reached her arm up and pulled the door handle. She pushed the door easily with one hand. "Go," she said.

Flynn rose slowly and took off. She was right behind him, and then beside him, and then in front. *She* hadn't quit running. Maybe no one had teased her or — more likely — she hadn't cared when they did. Or she had cared but pretended not to. The last seemed right to Flynn.

And her running seemed right, suddenly. The side-to-side gentle swing as muscles bunched and fired in powerful legs. She slowed down a little so he could catch up. "Go this way," he said, breath catching a little. "There's a park."

They didn't stop running until they were in Flynn's place, a grove of spruces that were planted a little close together, branches overlapping, with a bare, brown-needled space in the center.

There was plenty of room for a person of Flynn's size, barely enough for two. An intruding branch pricked him in the back.

The running had dissipated most of the fog. He felt about the way he did in fifth period. Now it seemed crazy to be out here with this girl, who came to the principal's office with bloody knuckles, that he didn't even know. His breath started coming quick and shallow.

She must have seen the unease, because her expression bittered up. "Look," she said, as if she'd said it before, "I won't hurt you. I just needed to talk to you."

Flynn scrunched back a little farther, spruce needles spiking through his shirt. "Okay," he said.

She looked at him soberly. He could see her deciding what to say — or maybe what not to.

"Okay," she said carefully. "Uh, like do you feel different from most people? Really different?"

Flynn felt his lips twist into a scornful expression. "Oh, not at all. I'm just like everybody else. What do you think?"

Her gaze dropped to her own hands, clenching and unclenching into fists. "I think you never fit in, not once. And there was nothing you could do about it."

For a moment, they both just sat there. Flynn wanted to cry, but he wasn't going to let himself.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly.

"Who are you?" he whispered. "Why are you like me?"

"This is going to sound stupid," she said. She took a gulp of air. "We don't come from Earth. We come from another planet."

"That is stupid," he said. "I was born here. I've always lived here."

"I don't mean 'us,'" she said. "I mean people like us. Our parents. We're not from Earth."

Flynn put his hands up over his face and bent forward. The words made so much sense it was scary. No wonder he didn't look like the other kids in his school, the spindly, scrawny kids whose heads bobbed up and down on their little necks when they nodded, the kids who didn't run like bears. "Ohmigod," he said, straightening up. He wasn't even the same species as those people. He started to rise. "I have to tell my parents."

She gave him a look. "Do you think they don't know?"

Flynn stopped. The words slashed through his mind. Of course they knew that's why they were so anxious for him to fit in why they gave him the medicine they knew they knew and they didn't tell him let him think there was something wrong with him that he wasn't like everyone else.

This time he did cry, tears running down over the wide, thick cheeks that maybe were attractive on a different planet but not here. Here he was ugly, didn't fit in, and they didn't tell him why.

By the time he'd finished crying, the medicine had worn off completely, or near enough to it. Flynn made a fist and pounded at the ground, gouging a hole. "Dammit, dammit, dammit."

Jillie just watched until he stopped. They were both flecked with dirt and pine needles. "How did you know all this?" he asked.

"I found some stuff," she said. "Pictures and things."

They came from a planet with heavier gravity than Earth, she told him. Lots of other similarities, though, which maybe explained why — even though they seemed different — they were remarkably like humans. Human enough to pass but not enough to fit in.

"Why did they — I mean we — come here?" Flynn asked.

"Why did the Pilgrims come to America?" she asked in turn. "Why did the Romans go to England? Why did Cortez go to Mexico."

History had never been Flynn's strong point; for some reason it was usually in the morning. "The Romans went to England? Oh, yeah." He thought for a minute. "They didn't all have the same reasons," he said.

"That's the way it was with us," she said. "I mean the ones who came to this planet. Some of them were trying to get away from our planet and some of them wanted to see if the Earth was worth taking over and stuff."

She kept talking, but Flynn tuned out. The medicine wasn't quite gone maybe, and his thoughts took him out of the conversation. Why had his parents come here why didn't they tell him why he was so different what the hell was going on?

Jillie's hand closed gently over his arm. Flynn realized he was crying again, just a little. "What am I going to do?" he said.

She shrugged, her shoulders bunching up. Flynn flinched, as people did when he shrugged. He hadn't realized until this moment how menac-

ing the movement looked. Stop it, he told himself. I'm not one of these puny Earth people. "Dirt people," he said out loud, liking the taste of the words.

Jillie laughed. "Funny isn't it."

"What are we called?" he asked.

"The Calessa," she said.

"The Calessa." Maybe his parents had spoken that word when he was younger, before they knew they had to be careful. It sounded at once strange and familiar. "The Calessa."

Anger mixed with relief and fear and sheer happiness. There was nothing wrong with him. He wasn't different. They should have told him. What was he going to do now?

He asked the question again out loud.

"You can come to my house," Jillie volunteered. "I'll show you the pictures."

Flynn ached inside. To see images of people he might grow up to be like, not the stick figure humans. His parents didn't count right now; Flynn was too angry. "Yes," he said. "I want to come."

They didn't run to Jillie's house. It was too far and the new knowledge had made Flynn tired and numb. When they got there, Jillie had to tug his arm to get him up to the porch. "It's okay," she said.

After Jillie unlocked the door, she said, "Wait here a minute, okay?" Then she disappeared through a doorway. Flynn heard stairs booming under her weight, a short silence, more booming as she returned.

They sat at the kitchen table with pop and honey bread. Flynn couldn't even swallow. The pictures were thin rectangles, flimsy and strong at the same time. Thick, stunted bushes. A sky with too much lavender mixed in. And people like them.

It must be a hot place, Flynn thought. The brawny people in the pictures wore skimpy shifts with slits up the sides, or loose, bunchy shorts. Some of the children — boys and girls both — wore nothing at all. Jillie started to take the pictures away at Flynn's gasp, but Flynn stopped her. "No," he said. "I want to see them."

It was possible to be embarrassed and repulsed and exultant at the same time — to look at the pictures with human standards of beauty and dress, and a new standard, built into his bones.

"This is my mom," she said shyly. The picture showed a group of people sitting in gritty sand, laughing. A woman lounged on the left side of the picture, one thigh showing through the slit in her garment. Her head tilted slightly back. Her hair was the same color as Jillie's, reddish-brown, and her eyes were mere slits with the strength of her open-mouthed laughter.

"She looks nice," Flynn said. He took a huge breath, let it out. "Why doesn't she tell you?" he asked.

Jillie looked at her hands, spread flat against the table, as big as plates. "I think people — our people — are after my mom. We keep moving around. We'll be somewhere for a while and bang, we'll just move. No warning."

"Why?" he whispered.

"I'm not all the way sure," she said, "but I think she doesn't agree with some of the people, about taking over the planet and stuff."

Flynn's head swam, not with the effects of medication, but with too many strange new ideas. He spread the pictures out on the table and just let himself look, not thinking.

Tried to, at least. The thoughts came anyway. His people. Maybe they should take over this dirt planet and these dirt people. Then see how well the dirt kids fit in. See them trying to run like bears.

The picture he held crinkled at the edges, he was gripping it so hard. "I'm sorry," he gasped, dropping it. As soon as he let go, the picture flattened out. "What are these made of?"

Jillie shrugged. "Beats me," she said. "Nothing from Earth."

"Can I have one?"

She looked hesitant for a moment, then shook her head. "I don't think that's a good idea. What if your parents found it?"

Flynn spread the pictures out on the table and studied them harder than he'd ever studied for school. They made him feel a little queasy, but he wanted to memorize them, soak up the lavender sky, and the way the people sat and stood and smiled. He could tell that they liked the way they looked.

Jillie's fingers entered his field of vision, scooting the pictures into a pile. "I'd better put them away now."

Flynn followed her downstairs, into her mother's bedroom, dark and

cool. "On our planet," she said, "the houses are sunk underground, to protect us from the heat."

She said *our planet* so easily that Flynn felt a hot surge of jealousy. He looked around, his eyes adjusting immediately to the gloom. The room looked much like his own parents' bedroom, with thick drapes hanging over the windows. Jillie put the pictures in one of the dresser drawers, way to the back and underneath the clothes.

Then she closed the drawer and turned back to face him, in a powerful, fluid motion. Flynn realized he was alone with a girl of his own species, for the first time. There wasn't enough air in the room.

Jillie backed up a step. And stopped. One of her hands raised just a fraction, reaching toward him, and dropped again. "We'd better go upstairs," she said. "My mom wouldn't like it if — "

Then she turned and ran up the stairs before Flynn could do more than taste the idea of *if*.

Flynn paused for one second, then pulled the drawer open and fished through silky underwear for an alien picture. He couldn't tell which one he got, didn't dare turn the light on to see. He shut the drawer as quickly as he could without making a noise and went upstairs, with the photograph tucked into his shirt.

Jillie squinted at him as he came into the kitchen. "What took you so long?"

Flynn knew from frequent and painful experience that he was not a good liar, so he said nothing, just looked at the floor, fighting an urge to scratch at the crinkly place where the picture touched his skin.

"Listen," said Jillie. "You'd better go pretty soon. My mom gets off work pretty early."

He nodded, although the idea of meeting the big, smiling woman wasn't at all frightening — until he thought of pawing through her drawer, messing it up, and stealing one of her secret pictures. Then his throat dried up. He went to the table and gulped down the pop that he hadn't been able to drink earlier.

"I've got to go," he said. Surely Jillie could see the outline of the picture through his shirt. "See you at school." It seemed like a lame thing to say to someone who had just revealed that you were an alien, but he couldn't think of anything better, so he left.

When his mother gave him his medicine the next morning, Flynn tucked it into his cheek, next to his gums, and drank the glass of water. Later, he spit the slimy, partially dissolved pills into the toilet, gagging at the taste. The familiar, unwelcome wooziness began, but it wasn't as bad, maybe, as usual.

He was right. By the time he spotted Jillie in the lunchroom, highly visible amongst the slim Earth kids — dirt kids, he reminded himself — he felt normal. Or as normal as anyone who wasn't on his own planet ever did. The idea that he was an alien — no, that the people who lived on Earth were aliens — was intoxicating. He returned the arc of Jillie's wave with a wilder, more exuberant arc of his own. Kids ducked on either side of him.

"Hello," he said, as he approached her table. Did she know about the picture? His face flared up, he could tell, but that was probably normal. Everyone in a wide circle around them was giggling, staring or whispering. "Flynn's got a girlfriend," he heard someone say. "And she's one big mama," said someone else.

Jillie casually clenched one big fist and the whispers and giggles — if not the looks — subsided.

"Hi," she said. "How are you?"

"Okay."

"You didn't have to take — " her voice trailed off.

Flynn lowered his. "I spit it out," he murmured.

She gave him a nod. "Good."

After that, there was a considerable silence while they both pretended to eat the cooks' idea of beef nachos. Then the lunch period was over, and Flynn had to go to his fifth period class. It was like being on a double dose of medicine: his thoughts were so jumbled up, orbiting the ideas Jillie had given him the day before — and Jillie herself.

They had lunch together every day that week, gradually falling into a rhythm of conversation, sometimes teasing, sometimes cryptically serious, discussing themselves and their world in such a way that no one but them could have known. The few kids who hung around long enough to catch part of it just shook their heads and rolled their eyes and walked away, apparently even more convinced that they were both weird.

And maybe, from an Earth perspective, they were. Flynn caught

himself breaking out into wide grins at odd times during the days: whenever he did something different from one of the other students, like holding his pencil between two fingers instead of three. He could just imagine telling Miss Rogers, who had worn herself out trying to instill a proper pencil grip when he was in first grade, "But this is the way we do things on my planet." He felt wickedly, secretly good.

Except when he thought about the stolen picture.

It was tucked into the toe of one of his dress shoes, which he never wore, in the back of his closet. And it was the worst of all possible pictures to have taken. Somehow, in the darkness, his fingers had snatched the picture of Jillie's mom, the one that she would be certain to miss the next time she flipped through the pictures.

And then what would she do?

In all his thinking, he couldn't think up an answer to that question. She wouldn't accuse Jillie of taking it, because she thought Jillie didn't know. What would she do? He couldn't ask Jillie himself, because she would know immediately that he was the culprit. What would she do?

She would pull Jillie out of school and leave town with no forwarding address, running again. She would pull Jillie out of school and out of his life and maybe Jillie was a figment of medicine dreams and he wasn't an alien —

But no, because the very afternoon Jillie didn't show up for lunch and he got sent to the principal's office for pounding his fist on his desktop in fifth period, he asked the secretary if Jillie was in school. She looked at him uncomfortably, lowering her voice, as if this were something she wasn't supposed to tell him but she couldn't help doing so, "Jillie's mother withdrew her from school this morning."

"Where did they go?" he asked, leaning close in to her, his voice an echo of her low whisper. "Where did they say they were going to go?"

"They didn't say." The secretary was leaning back in her chair, her face pale, and Flynn realized he was clenching and unclenching his giant, alien fist almost in her face.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I didn't mean to — I just wanted to know where they went."

She patted his arm gingerly. "That's okay," she said. "It's hard when a friend moves away."

Hard wasn't the word. Hard meant nothing. Hard was like marshmallow compared to Jillie leaving. Hard was jelly, whipped cream, slimy rotten cucumbers next to losing her and the secret conversations of a shared evolution.

The only thing that made it possible to stay alive...and let the skinny, scrawny dirt-kids live...and not scream his knowledge at his traitorous parents, was running. Flynn ran everywhere, his muscular legs swinging. "Beat that, Jillie," he would shout, smearing sweat from his face, not caring who heard, hoping she would.

And then the letter came. Addressed to Flynn, but his mother opened it. "Who is this from?" she asked, holding it out to him when he ran home from school one day.

Flynn just read, his running muscles cramping with sudden stillness. The sweat from exercise was mixed with fresh, cold sweat. It was a dumb letter, a very smart letter. *Dear Flynn, how's it hanging? Having a terrible time — wish you were here. No, wish we both weren't. Ha ha. Next time, don't take so many Pictures. Your friend, Jay*

He just stood there, reading it over and over. "Who is it from?" demanded his mother.

He was still not a good liar, but he made himself be. "Probably just a joke," he said. "The kids at school pick on me all the time."

His mother nodded. "I thought it might be something like that." She turned to go downstairs. *No I'm sorry they pick on you, kiddo. Things will get better. Maybe mothers from his planet were different from Earth mothers. Maybe they didn't care about their kids, whether or not they were hurt or miserable or — no, that couldn't be. He thought of the picture of the smiling woman, hidden in his closet. It wasn't all mothers. Just his.*

Later, after allowing himself one peek at the picture, he tucked the letter into the toe of the other shoe. He'd studied it for clues, all the while knowing they wouldn't be there. If there was something Flynn could figure out, then so could his parents, and maybe they were the ones that Jillie's mom was running away from.

That night, as he lay in bed, he tossed thoughts around in his head. Most of them dropped to the floor of his mind and cracked like rotten eggs. *Maybe he could call the FBI or NASA or someone and tell them there were*

aliens on Earth and he was one of them. Wrong. If anyone found out about him, he'd be stuck in the hospital and tested and maybe even dissected. Maybe he could run away and find Jillie and her mom. Fool. In which direction? Sure they were big, but not that big. Maybe he could confront his parents and — His head wouldn't even let him finish that one.

He fell asleep with no solutions, his mind cluttered up with the shells of broken ideas. But in his closet, in his shoes, there was the picture of a smiling woman on another planet and there was the letter from her alien daughter. He had the image of Jillie's wicked grin in his head, an image that would never crinkle or tear, and he had himself, living proof of a species that could handle more Gs than Earth could ever put out. He knew who he was and where he was from and that there was at least one other person like him.

Which was a whole lot better than before. ♣

COMING ATTRACTIONS

NEXT MONTH marks our forty-ninth anniversary, and of course we'll be celebrating it in style.

Our cover story is a beautiful and moody fantasia from the ever-elegant Tanith Lee, "All the Birds of Hell." This one's a real treat.

Next month we'll also have a "new" story from the late Avram Davidson. "Blunt" turned up in Avram's papers, and we're awfully glad it did.

We'll also be bringing you "The Bradshaw," a powerful SF novella by Judith Moffett. It has been too long since Judy has written any science fiction. It's good to have her back.

And that's not all, f-f-f-olks! We'll also have new stories by John Kessel, Rachel Pollack, Robert Sheckley, and many more, along with a vast array of columns. And as we enter our fiftieth year of publication, look for new goodies from the likes of Phyllis Eisenstein, Esther Friesner, and R. Garcia y Robertson as we head towards our huge fiftieth anniversary celebration. Hope you'll be there with us!

SPECULATIONS

A SIMPLE SOLUTION TO RACISM, SEXISM,
AND LOOKISM WILL BE FOUND...

YOU'RE
LOOKING
NONDESCRIPT
AS ALL GET
OUT,
CITIZEN!

AW,
YOU'RE JUST
SAYING THAT...

(DIGITAL VOICE
DISGUISE)



Howard Waldrop is one of the best short-story writers we've got. Stories like "Night of the Cooters," "The Ugly Chickens," and "Do Ya, Do Ya, Wanna Dance!" have shown that Mr. Waldrop's imagination and talents are singular and astonishing. Unfortunately, his stories seem to have side effects. Consider: he had a story in the last issue of Galaxy magazine. He had one in Shayol's last issue. He had one in the never-published last New Dimensions anthology and we've yet to see another Amazing or New Worlds since Mr. Waldrop's work appeared therein. So when Omni Online ceased publication shortly after they posted this story, we hastened to reprint it...in part hoping to lift the curse, but mostly because we feared you'd miss this moving tale.

Mr. Goober's Show

By Howard Waldrop

YOU KNOW HOW IT IS:

There's a bar on the corner, where hardly anybody knows your name, and you like it that way. Live bands play

there two or three nights a week. Before they start up it's nice, and on the nights they don't play — there's a good jukebox, the big TV's on low on ESPN all the time. At his prices, the owner should be a millionaire, but he's given his friends so many free drinks they've forgotten they should pay for more than every third or fourth one. Not that you know the owner, but you've watched.

You go there when your life's good, you go there when your life's bad; mostly you go there instead of having a good or bad life.

And one night, fairly crowded, you're on the stools so the couples and the happy people can have the booths and tables. Someone's put \$12 in the jukebox (and they have some taste), the TV's on the Australian Thumb-Wrestling Finals, the neon beer signs are on, and the place looks like the inside of the Ferris Wheel on opening night at the state fair.

You start talking to the guy next to you, early fifties, your age, and you

get off on TV (you can talk to any American, except a Pentecostal, about television) and you're talking the classic stuff: the last *Newhart* episode; *Northern Exposure*; the episode where Lucy stomps the grapes; the coast-to-coast bigmouth *Dick Van Dyke*; *Howdy-Doody* (every eight-year-old boy in America had a Jones for Princess Summer-Fall Winter-Spring).

And the guy, whose name you know is Eldon (maybe he told you, maybe you were born knowing it) starts asking you about some sci-fi show from the early '50s, maybe you didn't get it, maybe it was only on local upstate New York, sort of, it sounds like, a travelog, like the old *Seven League Boots*, only about space, stars and such, planets...

"Well, no," you say, "there was *Tom Corbett*, *Space Cadet*; *Space Patrol*; *Captain Video*" — which you never got but knew about — "*Rod Brown of the Rocket Rangers*; *Captain Midnight* (or *Jet Jackson*, *Flying Commando*, depending on whether you saw it before or after Ovaltine quit sponsoring it, and in reruns people's lips flapped after saying 'Captain Midnight' but what came out was 'Jet Jackson'...); or maybe one of the anthology shows, *Twilight Zone* or *Tales of* — '"

"No," he says, "not them. See, there was this TV..."

"Oh," you say, "a TV. Well, the only one I know of was this one where a guy at a grocery store (one season) invents this TV that contacts..."

"No," he says, looking at you (Gee, this guy can be intense!). "I don't mean *Johnny Jupiter*, which is what you were going to say. Jimmy Duckweather invents TV. Contacts Jupiter, which is inhabited by puppets when they're inside the TV, and by guys in robot suits when they come down to Earth, and almost cause Duckweather to lose his job and not get a date with the boss's daughter, episode after episode, two seasons."

"Maybe you mean *Red Planet Mars*, a movie. Peter Graves — "

"...Andrea King, guy invents hydrogen tube; Nazis; Commies; Eisenhower president. Jesus speaks from Mars."

"Well, *The Twonky*. Horrible movie, about a TV from the future?"

"Hans Conreid. Nah, that's not it."

And so it goes. The conversation turns to other stuff (you're not the one with *The Answer*) and mostly it's conversation you forget because, if all the crap we carry around in our heads were real, and it was flushed, the continents would drown, and you forget it, and mostly get drunk and a

little maudlin, slightly depressed and mildly horny, and eventually you go home.

But it doesn't matter, because this isn't your story, it's Eldon's.

When he was eight years old, city-kid Eldon and his seven-year-old sister Irene were sent off for two weeks in the summer of 1953, to Aunt Joanie's house in upstate New York while, not known to them, their mother had a hysterectomy.

Aunt Joanie was not their favorite aunt; that was Aunt Nonie, who would as soon whip out a Monopoly board, or Game of Life, or checkers as look at you, and always took them off on picnics or fishing or whatever it was she thought they'd like to do. But Aunt Nonie (their Mom's youngest sister) was off in Egypt on a cruise she'd won in a slogan contest for pitted dates, so it fell to Aunt Joanie, (their Father's oldest sister) to keep them the two weeks.

Their father's side of the family wasn't the fun one. If an adult unbent toward a child a little, some other family member would be around to remind them they were just children. Their cousins on that side of the family (not that Aunt Joanie or Uncle Arthridge had any kids) were like mice; they had to take off their shoes and put on house slippers when they got home from school; they could never go into the family room; they had to be in bed by 8:30 P.M., even when the sun was still up in the summer.

Uncle Arthridge was off in California, so it was just them and Aunt Joanie, who, through no fault of her own, looked just like the Queen in Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, which they had seen with Aunt Nonie the summer before.

They arrived by train, white tags stuck to them like turkeys in a raffle, and a porter had made sure they were comfortable. When Irene had been upset, realizing she would be away from home, and was going to be at Aunt Joanie's for two weeks, and had begun to sniffle, Eldon held her hand. He was still at the age where he could hold his sister's hand against the world and think nothing of it.

Aunt Joanie was waiting for them in the depot on the platform, and handed the porter a \$1 tip, which made him smile.

And then Aunt Joanie drove them, allowing them to sit in the front seat of her Plymouth, to her house, and there they were.

* * *

At first, he thought it might be a radio.

It was up on legs, the bottom of them looking like eagle claws holding a wooden ball. It wasn't a sewing machine cabinet, or a table. It might be a liquor cabinet, but there wasn't a keyhole.

It was the second day at Aunt Joanie's and he was already cranky. Irene had had a crying jag the night before and their aunt had given them some ice cream.

He was exploring. He already knew every room, there was a basement and an attic. The real radio was in the front room; this was in the sitting room at the back.

One of the reasons they hadn't wanted to come to Aunt Joanie's was that she had no television, like their downstairs neighbors, the Stevenses, did back in the city. They'd spent the first part of summer vacation downstairs in front of it, every chance they got. Two weeks at Aunt Nonie's without television would have been great, because she wouldn't have given them time to think, and would have them exhausted by bedtime anyway.

But two weeks at Aunt Joanie's and Uncle Arthridge's without television was going to be murder. She had let them listen to radio, but not the scary shows, or anything good. And *Johnny Dollar* and *Suspense* weren't on out here, she was sure.

So he was looking at the cabinet in the sitting room. It had the eagle-claw legs. It was about three feet wide, and the part that was solid started a foot and a half off the floor. There was two feet of cabinet above that. At the back was a rounded part, with air holes in it, like a Lincoln Continental spare tire holder. He ran his hand over it — it was made out of that same stuff as the backs of radios and televisions.

There were two little knobs on the front of the cabinet though he couldn't see a door. He pulled on them. Then he turned and pulled on them.

They opened, revealing three or four other knobs, and a metal toggle switch down at the right front corner. They didn't look like radio controls. It didn't look like a television either. There was no screen.

There was no big lightning-bolt moving dial like on their radio at home in the city.

Then he noticed a double-line of wood across the top front of it, like

on the old ice-box at his grandfather's. He pushed on it from the floor. Something gave, but he couldn't make it go farther.

Eldon pulled a stool up to the front of it.

"What are you doing?" asked Irene.

"This must be another radio," he said. "This part lifts up."

He climbed atop the stool. He had a hard time getting his fingers under the ridge. He pushed.

The whole top of the thing lifted up a few inches. He could see glass. Then it was too heavy. He lifted at it again after it dropped down, and this time it came up halfway open.

There was glass on the under-lid. It was a mirror. He saw the reflection of part of the room. Something else moved below the mirror, inside the cabinet.

"Aunt Joanie's coming!" said Irene.

He dropped the lid and pushed the stool away and closed the doors.

"What are you two little cautions doing?" asked Aunt Joanie from the other room.

THE NEXT MORNING, when Aunt Joanie went to the store on the corner, he opened the top while Irene watched.

The inner lid was a mirror that stopped halfway up, at an angle. Once he got it to a certain point, it clicked into place. There was a noise from inside and another click.

He looked down into it. There was a big dark glass screen.

"It's a *television*!" he said.

"Can we get *Howdy-Doody*?"

"I don't know," he said.

"You better ask Aunt Joanie, or you'll get in trouble."

He clicked the toggle switch. Nothing happened.

"It doesn't work," he said.

"Maybe it's not plugged in," said Irene.

Eldon lay down on the bare floor at the edge of the area rug, saw the prongs of a big electric plug sticking out underneath. He pulled on it. The cord uncoiled from behind. He looked around for the outlet. The nearest one was on the far wall.

"What are you two doing?" asked Aunt Joanie, stepping into the room with a small grocery bag in her arms.

"Is...is this a television set?" asked Eldon.

"Can we get *Howdy-Doody*?" asked Irene.

Aunt Joanie put down the sack. "It is a television. But it won't work anymore. There's no need to plug it in. It's an old-style one, from before the war. They don't work like that anymore. Your uncle Arthridge and I bought it in 1938. There were no broadcasts out here then, but we thought there would be soon."

As she was saying this, she stepped forward, took the cord from Eldon's hands, rewound it and placed it behind the cabinet again.

"Then came the War, and everything changed. These kind won't work anymore. So we shan't be playing with it, shall we? It's probably dangerous by now."

"Can't we try it, just once?" said Eldon.

"I do not think so," said Aunt Joanie. "Please put it out of your mind. Go wash up now, we'll have lunch soon."

Three days before they left, they found themselves alone in the house again, in the early evening. It had rained that afternoon, and was cool for summer.

Irene heard scraping in the sitting room. She went there and found Eldon pushing the television cabinet down the bare part of the floor toward the electrical outlet on the far wall.

He plugged it in. Irene sat down in front of it, made herself comfortable. "You're going to get in trouble," she said. "What if it explodes?"

He opened the lid. They saw the reflection of the television screen in it from the end of the couch.

He flipped the toggle. Something hummed, there was a glow in the back, and they heard something spinning. Eldon put his hand near the round part and felt pulses of air, like from a weak fan. He could see lights through the holes in the cabinet, and something was moving.

He twisted a small knob, and light sprang up in the picture-tube part, enlarged and reflected in the mirror on the lid. Lines of bright static moved up the screen and disappeared in a repeating pattern.

He turned another knob, the larger one, and the bright went dark and then bright again.

Then a picture came in.

They watched those last three days, every time Aunt Joanie left, afraid at first, watching only a few minutes, then turning it off, unplugging it, and closing it up and pushing it back into its place, careful not to scratch the floor.

Then they watched more, and more, and there was an excitement each time they went through the ritual, a tense expectation.

Since no sound came in, what they saw they referred to as "Mr. Goober's Show," from his shape, and his motions, and what went on around him. He was on anytime they turned the TV on.

They left Aunt Joanie's reluctantly. She had never caught them watching it. They took the train home.

Eldon was in a kind of anxiety. He talked to all his friends, who knew nothing about anything like that, and some of them had been as far away as San Francisco during the summer. The only person he could talk to about it was his little sister, Irene.

He did not know what the jumpiness in him was.

They rushed into Aunt Joanie's house the first time they visited at Christmas, and ran to the sitting room.

The wall was blank.

They looked at at each other, then ran back into the living room.

"Aunt Joanie!" said Eldon, interrupting her, Uncle Arthridge and his father. "Aunt Joanie, where's the television?"

"Television...? Oh, that thing. I sold it to a used furniture man at the end of the summer. He bought it for the cabinetry, he said, and was going to make an aquarium out of it. I suppose he sold the insides for scrap."

They grew up, talking to each other, late at nights, about what they had seen. When their family got TV, they spent their time trying to find it again.

Then high school, then college, the '60s. Eldon went to Nam, came back about the same.

Irene got a job in television, and sent him letters, while he taught bookkeeping at a junior college.

April 11, 1971

Dear Bro' -

I ran down what kind of set Aunt Joanie had.

It was a mechanical television, with a Nipkov disk scanner. It was a model made between 1927 and 1929.

Mechanical: yes. You light a person, place, thing, very very brightly. On one side of the studio are photoelectric cells that turn light to current. Between the subject and the cells, you drop in a disk that spins 300 times a minute. Starting at the edge of the disk, and spiraling inward all the way around to the center are holes. You have a slit-scan shutter. As the light leaves the subject it's broken into a series of lines by the holes passing across the slit. The photoelectric cells pick up the pulses of light. (An orthicon tube does exactly the same thing, except electronically, in a camera, and your modern TV is just a big orthicon tube on the other end.) Since it was a mechanical signal, your disk in the cabinet at home had to spin at exactly the same rate. So they had to send out a regulating signal at the same time.

Not swell, not good definition, but workable.

But Aunt Joanie (rest her soul) was right - nothing in 1953 was broadcasting that it could receive, because all early pre-war televisions were made with the picture-portion going out on FM and the sound going out on short-wave (so her set had receivers for both) and neither of them are where TV is now on the wavelengths (where they've been since 1946).

Mr. Goober could not have come from an FCC licensed broadcaster in 1953. I'll check Canada and Mexico, but I'm pretty sure everything was moved off those bands by then, even experimental stations. Since we never got sound, either there was none, or maybe it was coming in with the picture (like now) and her set couldn't separate four pieces of information (one-half each of two signals, which is why we use FM for TV).

It shouldn't have happened, I don't think. There are weird stories (the ghost signals of a Midwest station people saw the test patterns of more than a year after they quit broadcasting; the famous 2.8 second delay in radio transmissions all over the world on shortwave in 1927 and early 1928).

Am going to the NAB meeting in three weeks. Will talk to everybody there, especially the old guys, and find out if any of them knows about Mr. Goober's Show. Stay sweet.

Your sis,
Irene

Eldon began the search on his own; at parties, at bars, at ball games. During the next few years, he wrote his sister with bits of fugitive matter he'd picked up. And he got quite a specialized knowledge of local TV shows, kid's show clowns, *Shock Theater* hosts, and eclectic local programming of the early 1950s, throughout these United States.

June 25, 1979

Dear Eldon -

Sorry it took so long to get this letter off to you, but I've been busy at work, and helping with the Fund Drive, and I also think I'm onto something. I've just run across

stuff that indicates there was some kind of medical outfit that used radio in the late '40s and early '50s.

Hope you can come home for Christmas this time. Mom's getting along in years, you know. I know you had your troubles with her (I'm the one to talk) but she really misses you. As Bill Cosby says, she's an old person trying to get into Heaven now. She's trying to be good the second thirty years of her life...

Will write you again as soon as I find out more about these quacks.

Your little sister,
Irene

August 14, 1979

Dear Big Brother:

Well, it's depressing here. The lead I had turned out to be a bust, and I could just about cry, since I thought this might be it, since they broadcast on both shortwave and FM (like Aunt Joanie's set received) but this probably wasn't it, either.

It was called Drown Radio Therapy (there's something poetic about the name, but not the operation). It was named for Dr. Ruth Drown, she was a real osteopath. Sometime before the War, she and a technocrat started working with a low-power broadcast device. By War's end, she was claiming she could treat disease at a distance, and set up a small broadcast station behind her Chicago suburb office. Patients came in, were diagnosed, and given a schedule of broadcast times they were supposed to tune in. (The broadcasts were directly to each patient, supposedly, two or three times a day.) By the late '40s, she'd also gone

into TV, which is of course FM (the radio stuff being short-wave). That's where I'd hoped I'd found someone broadcasting at the same time on both bands.

But probably no go. She franchised the machines out to other doctors, mostly naturopaths and cancer quacks. It's possible that one was operating near Aunt Joanie's somewhere, but probably not, and anyway, a committee of docs investigated her stuff. What they found was that the equipment was so low-powered it could only broadcast a dozen miles (not counting random skipping, bouncing off the Heaviside layer, which it wouldn't have been able to reach). Essentially they ruled the equipment worthless.

And, the thing that got to me, there was no picture transmission on the FM (TV) portion; just the same type of random signals that went out on short-wave, on the same schedule, every day. Even if you had a rogue cancer specialist, the FCC said the stuff couldn't broadcast a visual signal, not with the technology of the time. (The engineer at the station here looked at the specs and said "even if they had access to video orthicon tubes, the signal wouldn't have gotten across the room," unless it was on cable, which it wasn't.)

I've gone on too long. It's not it.

Sorry to disappoint you (again). But I'm still going through back files of Variety and BNJ and everything put out by the networks in those years. And, maybe a mother-lode, a friend's got a friend who knows where all the Dumont records (except Gleason's) are stored.

We'll find out yet, brother. I've heard stories of people waiting twenty, thirty, forty years to clear things like this up. There was a guy who kept insisting he'd read a

serialized novel in a newspaper, about the fall of civilization, in the early 1920s. Pre-bomb, pre-almost everything. He was only a kid when he read it. Ten years ago he mentioned it to someone who had a friend who recognized it, not from a newspaper, but as a book called Darkness and the Dawn. It was in three parts, and serial rights were sold, on the first part only, to, like three newspapers in the whole U.S. And the man, now in his sixties, had read it in one of them.

Things like that do happen, kiddo.

Write me when you can.

Love,

Irene

Sept. 12, 1982

El -

I'm ready to give up on this. It's running me crazy - not crazy, but to distraction, if I had anything else to be distracted from.

I can't see any way out of this except to join the Welcome Space Brothers Club, which I refuse to do.

That would be the easy way out, give up, go over to the Cheesy Side of the Force. You and me saw a travelog, a See-It-Now of the Planets, hosted by an interstellar Walter Cronkite on a Nipkov disk TV in 1953. We're the only people in the world who did. No one else.

But that's why CE3K and the others have made so many millions of dollars. People want to believe, but they want to believe for other people, not themselves. They don't

want to be the ones. They want someone else to be the one. And then they want everybody to believe. But it's not their ass out there saying: the Space Brothers are here; I can't prove it, take my word for it, it's real. Believe me as a person.

I'm not that person, and neither are you; OR there has to be some other answer. One, or the other, but not both; and not neither.

I don't know what to do anymore; whatever it is, it's not this. It's quit being fun. It's quit being something I do aside from life as we know it. It is my life, and yours, and it's all I've got.

I know what Mr. Goober was trying to tell us, and there was more, but the sound was off.

I'm tired. I'll write you next week when I can call my life my own again.

Your Sis

Cops called from Irene's town the next week.

After the funeral, and the stay at his mother's, and the inevitable fights, with his stepfather trying to stay out of it, he came home and found one more letter, postmarked the same day as the police had called him.

Dear Eldon -

Remember this, and don't think less of me: What we saw was real.

Evidently, too real for me.

Find out what we saw.

Love always,
Irene

...

So you'll be sitting in the bar, there'll be the low hum and thump of noise as the band sets up, and over in the corner, two people will be talking. You'll hear the word "Lucy" which could be many things — a girlfriend, a TV show, a late President's daughter, a 4-million-year-old ape-child. Then you'll hear "M-Squad" or "Untouchables" and there'll be more talk, and you'll hear distinctly, during a noise-level drop, "...and I don't mean Johnny-fucking-Jupiter either..."

And in a few minutes he'll leave, because the band will have started, and conversation, except at the 100-decibel level, is over for the night.

But he'll be back tomorrow night. And the night after.

And all the star-filled nights that follow that one. ☞



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CURIOSITIES

THE MANUSCRIPT FOUND AT SARAGOSSA BY COUNT JAN POTOCKI

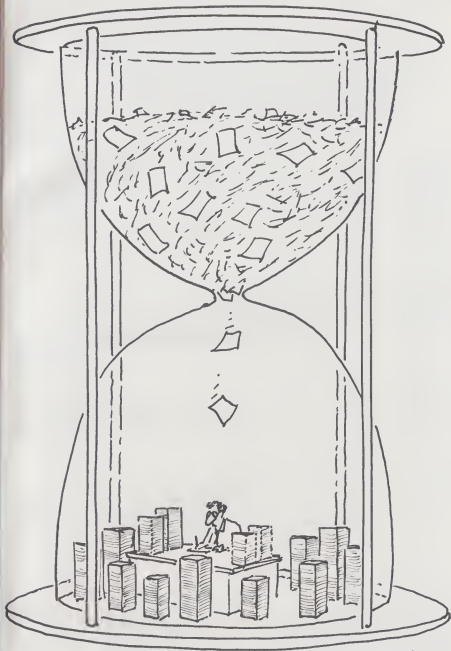
Count Jan Potocki, a widely traveled Polish army officer, blew his brains out in 1815, using a silver bullet (first blessed by the castle chaplain). He was, it is said, convinced he had become a werewolf, and there were other rumors, of incest and of strange melancholias.

His book, the convoluted and barely finished *Manuscrit Trouvé à Saragosse* is a work of dark genius. A young officer traveling to Madrid spends a night in a haunted inn, where he is the recipient of the advances of two Moorish sisters—or, perhaps, as he discovers on waking beneath a gibbet between the bodies of two bandits, he is the victim of ghostly malice. For the next sixty-six days, and for a hundred-odd stories, he will no longer be sure what is real, and neither will we. (Indeed, some scholars have suggested that the manuscript as a whole might even be some strange sort of fraud.)

Potocki is the Scheherazade here: everyone the officer meets has a tale to tell, and people inside those stories have their own tales, stories nest in other stories, connecting directly and at tangents: mysteries in one story are explained much later in another tale entirely. We meet the Wandering Jew, demoniacs and caballists, bankers, hermits and many mysterious women. The stories range from horror to erotic tales of courtly love. The nature of faith and religion is called into question; so too the nature of stories.

The ultimate resolution of the tale (a Moorish scheme, a hidden gold mine and sundry secret histories revealed) is comparatively perfunctory: the Saragossa Manuscript is a mirrored labyrinth with an unsatisfying resolution. Perhaps had Potocki not become convinced he was a werewolf he might have given us a finer ending. But with a book like this it's the journey that matters, not the destination.

—Neil Gaiman



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